

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Bhakti Yoga Book 5

A BHAKTA'S JOY AND DISCIPLINE

*From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century*

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

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With kind regards, ॐ and prem

Sriani Nivaran

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*Including answers from the satsangs of
Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

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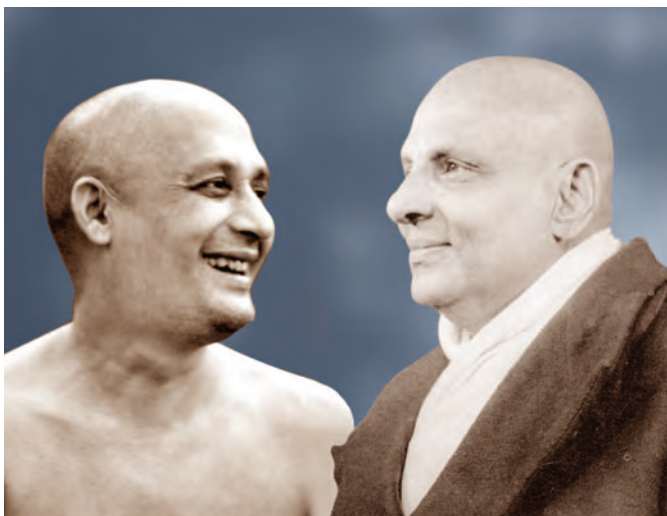
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Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga
and to our guru Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati
who continues to inspire and guide us
on our spiritual journey.*

Swami Niranjan

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Preface

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Conversations on the Science of Yoga is an encyclopaedic series which brings together the collected teachings of two generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh, Swami Satyananda Saraswati of Munger. Satsangs given by Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati on his numerous national and international tours also provide the answers to many questions on this vast subject. These luminaries represent a living tradition in which the eternal knowledge and wisdom of yoga vidya has been passed from guru to disciple in a dynamic continuum from the early twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first century.

The series consists of sets of books which present the vast, timeless culture of yoga topic by topic, in question and answer format. In this way, complex and profound subjects such as karma yoga, hatha yoga and bhakti yoga, are presented in clear, simple language. These conversations on yoga reflect an ancient and enduring approach to the transmission of wisdom, in which spiritual aspirants seek answers to their questions at the feet of the guru.

Many of the answers also include verses from the various relevant scriptures, connecting the modern experience with the classical tradition. It is through the lives and teachings of the masters that the scriptures are correctly and intuitively

interpreted for each generation, ensuring that the light of these revelations continues to illumine and inspire the hearts and minds of all who aspire for spiritual upliftment.

Conversations on the Science of Yoga has been compiled from the rich archive of satsangs and writings, both published and unpublished, which is held at the Bihar School of Yoga, Munger. The organization of this material into the major branches of yoga and related topics creates a unique interpretation of the classical yogic sciences for the benefit of humanity in the modern era. Deeply founded in tradition, the teachings are both systematic and practical, addressing the needs of individuals and society at a time when adjustment to constant change is placing unprecedented pressure on people all over the world.

The Bihar Yoga tradition

Bihar School of Yoga is ideally placed to produce this major contribution to yogic literature. Founded in 1963 by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, the system known in India as Bihar Yoga and internationally as Satyananda Yoga, seamlessly integrates all facets of the yogic tradition, including the various branches of yoga, the philosophies which are fundamental to the yogic culture and the dynamism of

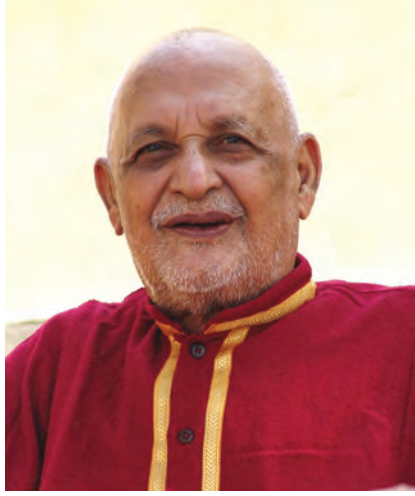


self-realized preceptors which ensures that the yoga vidya remains fresh and relevant in any age. This all-inclusive approach means that yogic practices are available as tools for holistic life management, while other *vidyas*, spiritual sciences, such as Tantra, Vedanta and Samkhya provide a broad philosophical base. Emerging from this living tradition, *Conversations on the Science of Yoga* is a unique and precious offering to humanity.



Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963)

Swami Sivananda was a towering spiritual force in the yogic renaissance which developed in India in the first half of the twentieth century. After serving as a doctor in Malaya, he returned to India to pursue his spiritual aspirations, and in 1924 was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in Rishikesh. He founded the Divine Life Society, toured India extensively, wrote hundreds of books and inspired thousands around the world to practise yoga and lead a divine life. Swami Sivananda's eightfold path of yoga – serve, love, give, purify, do good, be good, meditate, realize – expresses his philosophy of service to humanity and continues to guide the work of the Bihar School of Yoga.



Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009)

Swami Satyananda was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa by his guru Swami Sivananda, in 1947. After serving his guru's mission in Rishikesh for twelve years, he founded the International Yoga Fellowship in 1956 and the Bihar School of Yoga in 1963. From that base he took the teachings to the rest of the world, fulfilling the mandate of his guru to 'spread yoga from door to door and shore to shore.'

Through his genius and compassion, many ancient, complex and esoteric practices were systematized, simplified and made available to people of all ages, cultures and creeds. Swami Satyananda's blend of charisma and pragmatism attracted multitudes of devotees wherever he went, giving rise to a global movement and creating a far-reaching network of ashrams, yoga centres and teachers. Meanwhile, the headquarters in Bihar continued to expand its many programs, including the publishing division, producing numerous books that both preserve and disseminate the incredibly rich seam of practical wisdom which flows through this lineage.

In 1988 Swami Satyananda renounced his mission in order to live as a paramahansa sannyasin, performing higher

spiritual and vedic sadhanas in an isolated location. During this chapter of his life, he also realized his guru's teaching of 'serve, love, give', by establishing Sivananda Math, an organization dedicated to raising the living standards of the weaker and underprivileged sectors of society.

At midnight on 5 December 2009, Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati attained mahasamadhi.



Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (1960)

A yogi from earliest childhood, Swami Niranjanananda joined the Bihar School of Yoga in 1964 and was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in 1971. At the age of eleven he was sent to live abroad by his guru Swami Satyananda, giving him direct experience and understanding of people from a vast array of cultures and walks of life. These years instilled in him a rare, cross-cultural insight into human nature, enabling him to communicate and interact with the international community with familiarity, ease and humour.

Combined with his depth of spiritual and yogic knowledge, this background equipped Swami Niranjanananda to guide the Bihar School of Yoga and the international yoga movement from 1983 until 2008, when he began handing

over the administration to the next generation. During this time he also authored many classic books on yoga, tantra and the upanishads and founded Bihar Yoga Bharati, the world's first yoga university, while continuing extensive national and international touring.

In 2010, Swami Niranjan established Sannyasa Peeth to enable seekers to experience the spiritual and cultural traditions of India in their essence. The year marked his entry into a phase of higher sadhana and tirtha yatra.

In 2013, he conducted the World Yoga Convention in Munger to celebrate the golden jubilee of the Bihar School of Yoga, and launched a new era of yogic renaissance. Since then, Swami Niranjan has been working to develop the next stage of yogic training and teaching, and has initiated several programs to help people deepen their experience of yoga and imbibe the traditional wisdom of yoga vidya.



Yoga is not a philosophy, it is a practical science. Philosophy gives you knowledge, yoga gives you experience. This is the beauty of yoga. That experience is a manifestation of your inner being.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati

Introduction

When humankind learns how to love and serve each other, be kind and tolerant to each other, help each other and share the problems, worries and ideas of others, then each family, each society and the world will be a better place to live in.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

Book 5 in the series on bhakti yoga, *A Bhakta's Joy and Discipline*, draws together the two aspects of sadhana in bhakti yoga: love and service. Both are necessary, go hand in hand and need to be practised in the right proportion. They are not contradictory but the essential ingredients in a bhakta's pursuit of the goal. As joy and discipline become a continuous experience, in the same manner, life and sadhana become one. The bhakta discovers the interplay between personal effort and the guiding hand of the Divine, personal aspirations and 'Thy will be done'.

Daily life is the stage for joy and discipline. One's lifestyle and interaction with the family, at the workplace and in society offer ample opportunities to modify attitude and behaviour, to move from tamas to sattwa, from self-centred to selfless motivation, from an involvement with the world to a constant remembrance of the reality beyond. Nothing has to change except one's perspective, intention and commitment.

The nine steps discussed in Books 3 and 4 are disciplines of bhakti yoga to be practised, applied and developed just as one practises asanas or concentration. The only difference is that no specific time is set aside for an aspirant of bhakti yoga. This is a twenty-four hour practice of transformation and connection.

Kirtan and anushthana

In Book 4 of the series on bhakti yoga, *In Search of Bhakti*, the chapter on 'Remembrance' explained how the heart of bhakti yoga is constant remembrance of the goal. The goals may be many: to attain purity of one's being, to cultivate sattwa in one's life, to develop atmabhava and *santosha*, contentment, to adhere to the teaching one has chosen to follow, or simply to lay down one's life in surrender. Japa is the bhakta's tool to keep the heart alert and awake to constant awareness, constant remembrance.

Another spontaneous expression of bhakti yoga is kirtan, the bhakta's way to express longing, praise and joy. It helps the bhakta come closer and closer to the beloved. Kirtan is not music, fun or entertainment. It is a discipline, a sadhana which follows a system and rules. It is the art of channelling one's emotions away from the mundane towards the Divine. Raucous, noisy singing and performance is never kirtan, for the aim is to efface the self-arrogating identity and humbly chant the joy of one's love.

The feeling, *bhava*, with which one is able to express this love and adoration is the core of each kirtan, not the words or phrases, nor the rhythm or tune. Those are the gross, external means to convey the sweet feelings of the bhakta. The truth of these feelings is found in the silence of a bhakta's heart, yet when the heart cannot contain it any longer it bursts into song, into kirtan.

Traditions and cultures of all ages and civilizations have recognized the power of song and dance and used that power to attain *bhava samadhi*, samadhi attained through intense emotion. Christian mystics, the Sufi dervishes of

Islam and the bhakti cults of India know that sound is able to take them beyond the boundaries of body and mind.

The rigorous, well-defined rules of anushthana are another way of managing, focusing and transcending the energy of human emotion. The aspirant makes a commitment for a certain period of time – one day, one week, one month or many months – and follows the prescribed regulations. Sadhana, number of rounds of mantra japa, diet, daily routine of waking and resting, restraint of speech, sexual interaction and contact with the outside world are just some of the disciplines of an anushthana. The aspirant makes a sankalpa, dedicates his practice and becomes fully immersed, with no thought in mind other than the successful completion of the anushthana.

This highly disciplined practice is done of one's own free choice, with a selfless motive for the benefit of others, and with a heart full of pure joy. Anushthana is known to every system of belief the world over. Periods of fasting, vigils and penance are disciplines followed every year by millions of people around the world. Novena, the nine-day period of worship of Mother Mary in Christianity, the period of Ramadan in Islam, and Yom Kippur in Judaism are observed with the faith that they will bring the seeker closer to the Divine. The hardship, borne and accepted for that purpose only, seem trifling compared to the intense feeling of gratitude, fulfilment and peace at the end of the anushthana. For a bhakta, the ecstasy found in kirtan and the exacting discipline of anushthana are the two faces of the same coin – the coin which will bring divinity into one's life.

A heart connection

Two more practices help to maintain awareness of a dimension which is not bound and limited by one's day-to-day activities, but which influences directly one's understanding and approach to life: awareness of one's ishta devata, and prayer. Both keep the connection alive and the heart open.

A symbol, image or object which can divert one's attention away from confusion and suffering, and direct it to a feeling of comfort and trust, is one's ishta devata. It is a visual safe haven where one is able to rest from the storms of life, and find peace and the strength to continue the journey. Swami Niranjanananda states that "Each individual has a unique connection with an ishta devata which links them to the higher reality." This link is always accessible to the open heart of the aspirant.

Prayer is also a means to create a link. When the aspirant wants to express joy, gratitude, doubts, fears, loneliness or despair, prayer is the way of communication. It is not the prescribed ritual of prayer found in religions and systems of belief, but the silent language of the heart which conveys the intimate feelings of the aspirant. Saints and sages of all times have known the power of prayer and encouraged seekers to develop their own personal style of connecting with their source of inspiration. Whatever the source may be, prayer is the easy and direct line of contact, provided the sentiment is pure and sincere.

Birthright of all

With bhakti yoga, the aspirant embarks on a novel understanding of living life. Every moment is an opportunity which can be infused with the awareness of a higher reality, the effort of connecting to that reality and the joy of communion with that reality. This experience is based on a continuous play of give and take between the aspiring bhakta and the chosen object of bhakti. There needs to be commitment of endeavour and desire to live in tune with one's dharma and karma, regardless of personal whims and aspirations.

Divine intervention or grace is always present in abundance and in many shades and colours. Swami Sivananda describes the process in these words: "In the beginning we see God's grace working behind a veil and understand it vaguely. As we become purified and our faith in Him

increases, we see clearly how His grace works. Then our losses, failures and sorrows have a new meaning: we see them as opportunities for making our contact with God more intimate.” Without wholehearted dedication to the process of purifying one’s thoughts, words and deeds, and making one’s emotions selfless and sattwic, the veil will keep divine grace hidden from experience.

Adjusting one’s lifestyle and interactions in the world, and managing one’s place and role in society and in the family, are aspects of life which the bhakta can purify with sincerity of intention, unshakeable faith and a change of heart. This approach is based not on reasoning and logic, but on the intense longing ‘to live the life divine’ that Swami Sivananda called the birthright of all.

Creating a connection

This ‘life divine’ expresses itself in the connection with one’s inner self, with one’s fellow beings, nature and the Divine. They are no longer separate entities but part of the same essence of *Satyam*, *Sivam*, *Sundaram* – Truth, Goodness and Beauty, that pervades the whole of creation.

For each individual the means to connect is *seva*, service to those in need. Seva is the test of a bhakta’s sincerity and commitment. It is the bhakta’s task to expand empathy and compassion beyond the field of one’s near and dear one’s and include the stranger, the unknown person who suffers. Thus, your expression of humanity will know no boundaries but lead to the experience of *atmabhava*, including everybody within your own heart. This is Swami Satyananda’s advice: “If you want success in spiritual life, find a way to serve the poor. It is not wrong to visit a church, mosque or temple, but the most important way to worship God is to see Him in His creation.”

The Age of Bhakti

A Bhakta’s Joy and Discipline concludes with a vision embracing the whole of humankind. Bhakti yoga is the yoga of the 21st century as predicted by seers and sages. They are

proven right as, at the dawn of the new era, people of all nations are longing to experience and express the qualities of the heart. Kirtan and the disciplines of bhakti yoga are being accepted as tools to bring about this transformation.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati predicted that, "In the next century, scientists will turn their eyes towards bhakti, and they will conduct research into the human psyche in the same way that they are doing research on matter, electronics, nuclear physics in this century. In the next century they will work on faith, belief and devotion. They will discover the impact of devotion on the human mind, behaviour and constitution, and its effect on society and civilization." He called it the 'Age of Bhakti'.

Scientists are discovering the power of raw emotions and the even greater power of purified and well-directed emotions. The wild fires of fanaticism and intolerance are a reality for millions of innocent people the world over. They will, however, not be able to withstand the sweet current of brotherhood, born of love and the desire to be good and do good to others.

The purity of heart does not know of colour, caste or creed. The culmination of bhakti is the understanding and experience of oneness, which will usher in an age of peace for the individual, the family and society. Once the heart has dissolved boundaries and borders by connecting to all fellow human beings through seva, the light of its love is free to shine and illumine every hearth and home.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati said, "The day the philosophy of bhakti is understood by humanity, the world will become a place for the gods to visit."

1

Kirtan

Kirtan means to ponder the power of God and to spread the glory of God.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

WHAT IS KIRTAN?

What has the power to uplift society?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are two things that can uplift and transform society: mantra and love. People realized this in the past, yet they could not discipline themselves. The hippie movement of the 1960s failed, as music became entertainment and love became sensual and carnal. That is the sad reality. However, the same cycle is coming back, with mantra, music, and the need to again discover the feeling of love within. People are exploring the possibility of working with mantra and music to cultivate their sensitive qualities and natures.

What is the strength of kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: When several people join together and practise sankirtan, a huge spiritual current or *mahashakti* is generated. This purifies the heart of the aspirants and elevates them to the sublime heights of divine ecstasy or samadhi. The powerful vibrations are carried to distant pla-

ces. They bring elevation of mind, solace and strength to all people, and work as a harbinger of peace, harmony and concord. They annihilate hostile forces and quickly bring peace and bliss to the whole world.

Hari says to Narada, “*Naham vasami Vaikunthe yoginam hridaye na cha, madbhakta yatra gayanti tatra tishthami Narada.*” – “I dwell not in Vaikuntha nor in the hearts of yogis, but I dwell where my devotees sing my name, O Narada.” Kirtan destroys sins, vasanas and samskaras, fills the heart with prem and devotion and brings the devotee face to face with God.

What is the purpose of practising kirtan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Kirtan plays an important part in yogic and spiritual life, just as hatha yoga, raja yoga, meditation or kundalini yoga do. Everyone exists at different levels of experience simultaneously. There is the sensorial level, where experience comes only through the senses. The intellectual level, the rational mind, gives rise to likes and dislikes, aspirations and ambitions. At the emotional level, the level of feelings and sensitivity, one is able to connect with something non-rational and be in tune with the energy that transforms sensitivity and feelings into emotion. The psychic level includes latent impressions, ingrained attitudes, habits, samskaras and karmas that define character and self-identity. Finally, there is the spiritual level, which can only be directly experienced when the other four levels are in harmony.

In the process of yoga, one has to access and bring each level together little by little, rather than focusing on just one level or dimension – only the body, only the mind or only the feelings. If one is able to develop a fully comprehensive awareness, then, according to the tradition, complete fulfilment, *poornata*, can be experienced in this life. Just as in this process raja yoga, jnana yoga, kriya yoga or kundalini yoga may be important, to the same extent and intensity kirtan is recommended.

Why is kirtan the best bhakti yoga practice to incorporate into one's sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: There are many ways, but the easiest, cheapest and safest method is kirtan. From a group of about fifteen people, select one kirtan and one melody and let one person lead the kirtan. He will sing the words first and the others will sing them after him. There should be a few instruments, in particular a drum. It is the most important instrument because its vibrations have an immediate effect on the brainwaves and the blood circulation. In fact, the rhythm of the drum is a sound to massage both the body and the mind.

Sing kirtan for about half an hour, then sit quietly for meditation. If you have involved yourself in the kirtan completely, when you sit for meditation you will find that the highway is clear. There will be no traffic jam on the mental plane.

Why is kirtan such an effective method of inducing devotion in a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Kirtan is one of the nine modes of bhakti. Sankirtan is an exact science. One can realize God through kirtan alone. This is the easiest method for attainment of God-consciousness.

The harmonious vibrations produced by the singing of the names of the Divine help devotees to control their mind easily. They produce a benign influence on the mind. They elevate the mind at once from its old ruts or grooves to magnanimous heights of divine splendour and glory. If one does sankirtan from the bottom of the heart with full bhava and prem, even the trees, birds and animals will be deeply influenced. They will respond. Such is the powerful influence of sankirtan.

People want to hear sweet music, see beautiful objects and watch people dance. Their love is only passion and not pure divine love. If there is anything in this world that can change the heart of a person in a short time, it is music and dance.

Music melts the heart of even the most stony-hearted man. This method is made use of in kirtan bhakti where the erotic emotion is directed towards divinity and not towards sensual enjoyments. Kirtan is sweet, pleasant and easily changes a person's heart.

The devotee is thrilled with divine emotion. He loses himself in the love of God. He gets horripilation in the body due to extreme love of God. He weeps when thinking of the glory of God. His voice becomes choked and he flies into a state of divine bhava. The devotee is ever engaged in japa of the Divine Name and in describing His glories to one and all. Wherever he goes he begins to sing and praise God. He requests all to join his kirtan. He sings and dances in ecstasy. He makes others also dance.

Such practices should be the outcome of a pure heart, and they should not be merely a show. God knows the inner secret of all and none can cheat Him. There should be perfect straightforwardness and his actions should be the natural outpouring from the heart.

What is the Satyananda system of kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: I have developed a unique system of kirtan called the Satyananda system or the Munger system. Elsewhere in India there is no system to kirtan; people shout, they do not listen to others nor do they experience an exalted feeling. In the Satyananda system the participants are aware of God's name. If I allowed the kirtan *Govinda jaya jaya Gopala jaya jaya* to be sung continually in the same rhythm for more than one hour with rapt devotion while steadily climaxing, many participants would go into *bhava samadhi* or trance. However, I would need to stop it because it is not the right time to go into *bhava samadhi*. Swami Sivananda used to say, "God's Name is the quickest, safest, cheapest, surest and best way to reach God." He said safest because kundalini yoga and tantra are not the safest; no other way is sure except kirtan. Chanting of God's name with devotion is the national highway to reach Him.

Are there different kinds of kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: There are hundreds of thousands of kirtans belonging to Shaivas, Vaishnavas, Devi and Guru. There are so many kirtans that if a person tries to sing them all, each one could only be sung once.

Compared with the West, is kirtan the preferred sadhana in India?

Swami Satyananda: In western countries asanas are important, and in India it is kirtan. In India, when a meeting or satsang is to be held in a secular or non-secular place, it cannot begin without kirtan. Whether the president, military commander or a mahatma comes, whether a spiritual meeting or an agricultural plan is to be inaugurated, there must be kirtan. In the West it is up to each person to decide how a program is to be conducted, but asana, pranayama, mudra and bandha will form its basis.

Five centuries ago, there appeared in India a great sannyasin called Chaitanya. He was also known as Gouranga, for he was as fair as Europeans. He was a great intellectual, but he finally came to the realization that intellect was the barrier. He wanted to develop his bhakti or devotion and found the system of kirtan to be effective. So much so, that when he sang the name he would go into a trance.

Since the time of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, there has been an incessant tradition of incorporating kirtan with other forms of yoga. Side by side with the rigorous forms of yoga and the practice of meditation, the tender and delicate yoga of kirtan should also be practised.

In India, kirtan is seen as the easiest way to higher consciousness and it is one of the most ancient traditions that is still alive today. If a person passes through the villages of India after ten o'clock in the evening, he will find the villagers sitting together after their day's work singing kirtan. Sometimes thousands of people join this mass singing of kirtan.

What is the power of kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: The power created by kirtan changes the whole being from the outside, deep down to the inside. There comes a moment when one can transcend one's personality barriers.

Shiva was the archetypal yogi and he is known as *Nataraja*, Lord of the dance. Greater than Shiva was Sri Krishna who lived life just dancing it. Sri Krishna and his flute are inseparable elements. Where there is Krishna, there is a flute, where there is a flute, there is Krishna. The flute is the symbol of nada yoga, the inner flute that one hears in meditation. Sri Krishna spent his whole life in dancing and singing kirtan. This is one of the easiest forms of yoga by which one can not only relax and give spontaneous expression to one's higher or divine nature, one can also be at one with the cosmic self. This yoga brings one nearer and nearer to softness, to the loveliness and the natural feeling of life. Chaitanya, the great kirtanist of the middle ages in India who was born in Bengal, used to sing:

*Sri Krishna Chaitanya, Prabhu Nityananda,
Hare Ram, Hare Krishna, Sri Radhe Govinda.*

People used to walk behind him from kirtan to kirtan because this is how one evolves. This is the rhythm, the creativity. This is how one relaxes and increases one's potentiality. Maybe if people doing kirtan were measured they would have high alpha wave pattern vibrations. And what else does one need?

How does kirtan increase one's sensitivity?

Swami Niranjanananda: Kirtan is the chanting of the names of the Self of which one is a part, an expression. Everyone expresses the manifestations and identities of the Self. These names are composed in Sanskrit of *aksharas*, sound syllables, that never change. While they may appear to indicate a manifest form of divinity, in which, for example, *Rama* may evoke the image of Sri Rama and similarly for Sri Krishna, Buddha and Christ, the mantras do not represent

a personalized identity of the divinity, but an expression of that force and energy. When one chants the names, it is the syllables that alter the patterns of the mind according to the various sound frequencies and vibrations, making it clearer, tranquil, receptive and complete, thus increasing sensitivity and feeling. This sensitivity will help connect with the source of one's being and then one experiences yoga. This is the purpose and meaning of kirtan.

Just as there is an IQ, intelligence quotient, there is also an EQ, emotional quotient. The emotional quotient is not just confined to expressions of love and affection, compassion and charity; rather, it is expressed as sensitivity in all areas, no matter where the mind is directed. The mind may be directed to a particular point or focus, yet there is an awareness in which the whole field is also covered. In chanting the name, one is expressing sentiments that are free from the conditioning of such external inputs or samskaras. One is expressing those sentiments to this pure being, which is one's personal God; and if purity is an expression of God, why not learn how to connect with that?

Kirtan helps to achieve a state wherein one is able to express one's feelings towards nature in its purest form. Therefore, kirtan has a prominent place in ashram life, in yogic life and in the lives of all spiritual seekers. Kirtan is yoga for the feelings.

NAMDEV

Who was Namdev?

Swami Niranjanananda: Namdev (1269–1295) was born to a devout couple, Dama Seth and Gonai, who came from a line of renowned Vitthal bhaktas, bhaktas devoted to Sri Krishna. Strong faith, good conduct and a simple nature were the hallmarks of this family. From a young age, Namdev had been deeply influenced by the worship of Vitthal's image, japa of his name and singing of his kirtan and this infused a strong devotion to Vitthal in his heart.

One day his father had to go out on some work and the responsibility of the daily worship of Vitthal in the shrine at their home had been given to little Namdev. With a simple, childlike faith, he performed the pooja meticulously and closing his eyes in reverence, he offered a bowl of milk to the idol of Vitthal. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the milk was left untouched. He was filled with remorse and thought that he had done something wrong which had displeased Vitthal and that was why his offering was not accepted. He prayed for forgiveness with sincerity and great humility and yet the milk had still not been accepted. He gave up and burst into tears, crying that if Vitthal did not accept the milk, he would never drink milk again!

In the heart and eyes of this little devotee, God was not just an idol of stone but the great Pandharinath himself. This feeling was so strong in him that he could not understand why God was sulking like this and not drinking the milk. The plea that rose from the depth of little Namdev's heart reached Vitthal and He manifested in person. Accepting the offering of milk, He not only drank it at that point but accepted this offering from Namdev every day.

As per community tradition, Namdev's marriage was conducted while he was still quite young and after his father's demise, the responsibility of caring for the family fell on his shoulders. His wife and mother both urged him to take some interest in business and earn a livelihood; however, Namdev's time was fully devoted to singing kirtan. He soon left his hometown and went to live in Pandharpur, developing close friendship with other bhaktas like Gora Kumbhar and Savta Mali. Bathing in the holy Chandrabhaga, having darshan of the bhakta Pundalik and his beloved Vitthal, singing kirtan and bhajan in His praise – this was the form of his daily worship. The abhangas composed by Namdev are full of praise for the Divine, devotion to Him and a deep sense of gratitude for His grace.

When Jnaneshwar asked Namdev to accompany him on a pilgrimage, Namdev said that only if God gave his consent

would he agree to leave Pandharpur. When Jnaneshwar sought His permission, God replied that Namdev was a great favourite of His and could not bear to be apart from him even for a moment. Jnaneshwar was urged to take good care of him on the journey and God Himself placed Namdev's hand in Jnaneshwar's hand before they set off. Along the way there were soulful kirtans and interesting discussions with other bhaktas but Namdev's heart pined for his beloved Vitthal.

When Jnaneshwar sought to help Namdev realize the all-pervading presence of the Divine, Namdev said that was all very well but he would only be satisfied when he could have darshan of the great Pandurang. Asked to give his views on bhajan, Namdev is said to have replied that he was not a knowledgeable person or a scholar. All he had was complete trust in the grace of Vitthal. Kirtan was all that was dear to him. This, according to Namdev, was his understanding: looking upon each person with true affection and not being judgmental was his *vandana* or praise of the Divine; the best meditation was to behold God in every speck of creation and hold the image of the Lord's lotus feet fixed in one's heart at all times; establishing oneself in the love of the Divine and removing every trace of attachments to the world was the devotion of remembrance.

After visiting many holy places and shrines, they returned to Pandharpur and Namdev rushed to have darshan of his beloved Vitthal. He cried out that he must have been deluded and that is why he was sent wandering off far away. There were many holy places yet his heart was fixed on the banks of the Chandrabhaga and his feet did not wish to go in the direction of any other gods but Vitthal alone. He wondered what kind of place would that be where there was no gathering of Vaishnavas engrossed in the unbroken kirtan of His name?

Namdev is considered the founder of the Varkari sect in Maharashtra. This sect has a huge following of bhaktas who sing kirtan and bhajan, wandering from place to place. They also make two annual pilgrimages to Pandharpur, walking for

miles and days on end to reach there, all the while singing kirtan and praising Vitthal.

How did Namdev express his para bhakti?

Swami Sivananda: Namdev, a bhakta in Pandharpur, had a piece of bread and ghee ready for his breakfast. He was about to take his meal, when suddenly a dog rushed inside, snatched the bread with its mouth and ran away. Namdev went running after the dog with ghee in his hand, crying, “O Lord Vitthal, dry bread is not palatable for you. Kindly take this ghee along with the bread.” He fed the dog with the bread mixed in ghee. He himself did not take his food that day. To Namdev, who had para bhakti, the dog was Vittala, Sri Krishna. He saw Sri Krishna in all beings.

Namdev was not an author of any big treatise, but he left behind a large number of *abhangas*, short poems, full with the nectar of bhakti and love towards God. They are exceedingly sweet. Most of them are lost, but there are about four thousand abhangas which to this day are a great source of inspiration to all who would read them. The essence of Namdev’s message is:

Always recite the name of the Lord. Constantly remember Him. Hear His glory. Meditate on the Lord in your Heart. Serve the Lord with your hands. Place your head at His lotus feet. Do kirtan. You will forget your hunger and thirst and the Lord will be near you. You will attain immortality and eternal bliss.

THE MYSTERY OF KIRTAN

What are some of the benefits of kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: The mind is a peculiar combination of various kinds of moods, temperaments, whims and fancies. It is a strange mixture of various sentiments and emotions. Therefore, the rishis of yore have designed methods to control the mind. Control of the mind forms the most

important and major item of spiritual sadhana on the path of God-realization.

Melodious music soothes the nerves. In America doctors cure diseases by music. Shakespeare says in *The Merchant of Venice* (Act V, Scene 1):

The man who hath no music in himself or is not moved by the concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treason, stratagem and spoils. The motions of his spirit are dull as night, his affections dark as Erebus. Let no such man be trusted.

Vedanta and jnana can only be understood by a microscopic minority. The vast majority are fit for sankirtan bhakti only. Even the majority of highly intellectual people derive immense benefit by doing sankirtan. Their minds are elevated for practising meditation. The tossing of their minds is removed. Even so, one has to work hard in the practice of kirtan if one wishes to realize fully the fruits of kirtan bhakti yoga.

There is infinite shakti in God's names. It removes impurities from the mind. Vedantins say that there are three kinds of obstacles to self-realization: impurity, restlessness and ignorance. To remove them they prescribe selfless service, worship and meditation. Sankirtan alone can achieve these three together. Kirtan removes the impurities of the mind, steadies it and checks its tendency to vacillate, and ultimately it tears the veil of ignorance and brings the sadhaka face to face with God. Kirtan enables the devotee to realize the infinite here and now. Kirtan saves one from delusion.

God is a mystery. Mind is a mystery. The world is a mystery. How sankirtan transmutes human nature into divine nature, how it overhauls the old vicious samskaras, how it changes the mental substance, how it transforms or metamorphoses the asuric nature into pure sattwic nature and how it brings the devotee face to face with God is also a mystery. Science and reason can hardly explain the modus operandi of sankirtan.

What could the music of Tyagaraja Swami achieve?

Swami Sivananda: Tyagaraja Swami was a South Indian Telugu Brahmin. He was a great musician-saint and the father of South Indian music. He was a devotee of Sri Rama. He is said to have composed twenty-four thousand kirtans or songs in praise of Sri Rama. He was well known throughout South India and many maharajas were willing to have him as Durbar songster. Tyagaraja Swami was a superman and had direct darshan of Sri Rama on several occasions.

Once, the then raja of Pudukkottai tested the merits of the songsters in a strange way. He placed an unlit lamp amongst them and challenged the experts to light the lamp with a song only without using a match or any other means. Tyagaraja Swami meditated on Narada for a while, sang the *Raga Jyotiswaroopini*, the raga on the form of light, and the lamp lighted by itself. All were struck in wonder.

All the songsters of South India assemble every year in the month of January and celebrate his anniversary with great éclat. In January 1942 his 95th anniversary was celebrated.

Does one need to control the mind to be able to reach a heightened state of awareness?

Swami Satyananda: Yes, just as an animal trainer needs to tame a tiger and a snake charmer needs to tame a serpent. Kirtan must be done in a large group and with *tala*, timing. Tala is an attribute of the mind and by following the tala the mind goes deep without any effort.

At present it is not possible to experience this deep state due to the activities of the mind. However, if everyone dedicated two hours to singing *Hare Rama, Hare Rama*, the rhythm would start and gradually the vibration frequencies would rise. It is a scientific law that the higher the velocity, the lower the frequency and the higher the frequency, the lower the velocity. Through kirtan the mind loses its velocity and attains frequency and then the many minds become one mind.

For a few years I have not been listening to kirtan. I have been a lone emperor. I would sing to myself, but this is not kirtan. Kirtan is chanting God's name with a group of people for a prolonged period – one, two, three or four hours. When the mind becomes one with the mantra there is no difference between mind and mantra. The place where the kirtan is being sung becomes sanctified and purified. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam* Sri Krishna Himself says:

Until the whole body rejoices,
The mind is overcome with ecstasy,
The eyes overflow with tears of joy,
The inner and outer self is flooded with love,
There is no possibility of purifying the heart.

How does kirtan help to relieve an anxious mind?

Swami Satyananda: Saints and sages have spoken about naman sankirtan. It is an ancient science of this country, not a new concept. Nataraj was the first singer and lover of sankirtan. After him came Sanatan, Sanandan, Sanat Kumar and then Sanat Sujat. In the present era, there have been Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Mirabai, Shivaswami, Haridas, Ravidas and many others. These people used to say that Parameshwara is hiding in one's heart behind the veil of pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow. Therefore, to remove the worries and anxieties from within, one should start singing the name of the Divine. After half an hour or more the brainwaves slowly convert to alpha waves and one will start to experience pleasure.

Kirtan is not an intellectual yoga, but each and every sound that is produced in kirtan goes deep into one's consciousness. Intellectuals try to understand kirtan, yet for them it is difficult, as kirtan is mainly concerned with the emotional personality of the individual. Although the emotions are not properly understood and used, they are powerful tools in the hands of a person. Through the intellect one cannot go deep or realize consciousness. By

means of the intellect one can know about God, the truth, and so many topics, but one can never experience them.

How can mantra be used?

Swami Niranjanananda: Mantras are a part of bhakti yoga. They may be used as meditation or chanted. They may be used for healing other people and oneself. In the form of kirtan, mantras can be practised in many ways to evoke a different state of mind and experience through which one can develop unconditional love, develop the qualities of compassion and friendship, stop being dependent on others or on one's own ego and express sentiments freely.

Why is kirtan a good practice for a tamasic person?

Swami Satyananda: Tamasic people are the most passive. If they are put in the lotus posture and told to do a mala of *Om Namah Shivaya*, after fifteen minutes they become blank: no idea, no motion, no consciousness and the mala falls. After some time they start to think it is not necessary to repeat God's name while sitting in the lotus posture as God does not really care about the lotus posture. They lie down mumbling the mantra and then fall asleep. Tamasic people think that everything comes without difficulty and they do not want to make any effort. These people need a sadhana that can keep them awake and gives them a little pleasure, something like kirtan.

What is the power of singing kirtan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Singing kirtan and clapping has many benefits. It improves the circulation, activates the heart, stimulates the brain centres and removes sickness, and one becomes happy and joyous. Mantra chanting is a tradition in India. One should begin and end the day by remembering God's name. Usually one wakes up to the shrill sound of the alarm clock, which jars the brain and puts one in a cranky mood, yet there are alarm clocks which chant mantras instead. If one can begin the day by listening to

mantras, it frees up the mental obsessions and improves the quality of one's day.

The power of mantra is such that the scriptures define it as the force that liberates the mind from bondage – *Mananat trayate iti mantrah*. *Trayate* means 'to be free from', *iti* means 'is', *mantrah* means 'mantra', and *mananat* means 'continuous, obsessive thinking or brooding' from which one cannot extract oneself. Therefore, the rishis, the seers of ancient India, emphasized the use of mantra, not with the idea of ensuring the survival of a belief system, or to make people more god-fearing, but to improve the quality of life. Apart from the spiritual benefits, there are physical benefits as well. When one sings kirtan, one should participate wholeheartedly. One has to manifest the feeling and emotion to bring about a change in one's personality. Otherwise one remains the same. This is the secret of kirtan.

Can singing kirtan clear the energy in a house where there has been illness or a death?

Swami Satyananda: When ten, twenty or thirty people sing kirtan together they generate a combined energy that is powerful. One must have noticed that in some houses there is always someone sick. If people are unwell despite the house being pleasant and clean, it means that evil spirits are residing there. Banishing these spirits from the house is not an economical task, because if one asks a pandit to do it he will ask for a lot of money. However, when the name of God is sung in the home it becomes purified and bad spirits will not reside there. The filth is removed and people remain in a good mental state. When the light of the sun appears, darkness disappears. The name of God is like light. It enlightens and purifies wherever it exists.

When four or five children come together at home and sing film songs, nobody stops them. Similarly, they should come together and sing the name of God. The taste of film songs is of fun, while the taste of kirtan is of peace. Kirtan will rid the house of its bad energy. The method of kirtan costs

nothing and does the job well. The parents and children only need to sit together and sing the Lord's name: *Sri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram* or *Sri Krishna Govinda Hare Murare*.

How does kirtan alleviate suffering?

Swami Satyananda: In the scriptures it is said that the chanting of kirtan is the best means to ward off enemies. One's greatest enemies are lack of peace and restlessness of mind. If the mind becomes quiet, the impossible becomes possible. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Sri Krishna says to Arjuna (12:8):

*Mayyeva mana aadhatsva mayi buddhim niveshaya;
Nivasishyasi mayyeva ata oordhvam na samshayah.*

Fix your mind on Me alone; let your thoughts dwell on Me. You will hereafter live in Me alone. About this, there is no doubt.

In this age, if man wants to be liberated from the path of suffering, he has to think about an alternative means. There is pleasure in *bhoga*, enjoyment, but it is also possible to find an alternative method of achieving pleasure. Singing bhajans is an alternative to *bhoga*. One experiences immense pleasure through singing bhajans. If one establishes a relationship with God and secures that relationship with Him, be it love, submission or devotion, that gives pleasure. If one can experience pleasure in *Bhagavat bhajan*, singing God's name, then why choose the path of suffering which is the path of *bhoga*? In order to turn away from the path of *bhoga*, there is only one alternative and that is *bhakti*. God has made me understand that.

How does kirtan help a person overcome blocks and complexes in the mind?

Swami Satyananda: When a person sings kirtan he needs to forget that he is a gentleman, a great man or woman, a professor, engineer, scientist or a doctor. These are limitations of the personality and they are not a person's

definitions; they are superimpositions. When a person says, “I am a professor,” or “I am a lady from a great family,” it is superimposing something on oneself. When one sings kirtan, one must come down to the point of humility and think, “I am nothing.” Only if one can maintain this attitude will one be able to transcend complexes and blocks.

Does kirtan help to develop the intuitive mind?

Swami Sivananda: Sankirtan brings darshan of God or attainment of divine consciousness in this Kali Yuga. Sankirtan develops love. Those who do sankirtan in the beginning for the sake of mental enjoyment will realize the purifying effects of sankirtan after some time and then they will themselves do it with bhava and *shraddha*, faith. There is a mysterious power in the name of the Divine. Man cannot live on bread alone, but he can live on the name of the Lord.

What is the power of bija mantras chanted during sankirtan?

Swami Sivananda: Rishis and siddhas visit the place where sankirtan is held. One can see brilliant lights round the pandal. It brings about beneficial results and the devotee face to face with God. *Jivatma*, the individual soul, can become one with *Paramatma* or the Supreme Soul only through the process of evolution or ascent through the rungs of the spiritual ladder by means of nada-upasana. Nada is of three kinds: *sthoola*, gross or expressed; *ahata* and *sukshma*, subtle; or *anahata*, unexpressed. The former leads to the latter. The *samyoga* or union of prana with *anala*, the fire in the human soul, is indispensably requisite if the individual soul wishes to unite with Para Brahman or attain the highest nirvikalpa samadhi. The fire, *agni*, of mooladhara represents the *ra* bija. It ascends to meet the prana from the *murdha*, or *brahmarandhra*, which represents the *ma* bija. The combination of *ra-ma* is the taraka bija by which the individual soul crosses to the other shore of fearlessness and immortality and attains eternal bliss and supreme joy.

Sankirtan is an easy approach to the sukshma nada, subtle sound, and eventually to divine communion.

The mind is purified by constant sankirtan. It is filled with good and pure thoughts. Daily sankirtan strengthens the good samskaras. The mind of a person who trains himself in thinking good, holy thoughts develops a tendency to think good thoughts. His character is moulded and transformed by continuous good thoughts. When the mind thinks of the image of God during sankirtan, the mental substance actually transforms into the form of the image of God. The impression of the object is left in the mind. This is samskara. When the act is repeated often, the samskara gains strength by repetition and a tendency or habit is formed in the mind. He who entertains thoughts of divinity becomes transformed actually into the divinity himself by constant thinking and meditation. His bhava and disposition is purified and divinized; the meditator and the meditated, the worshipper and the worshipped, the thinker and the thought, become one and the same. This is samadhi. It is the fruit of sankirtan.

How did Tukaram enter the state of bhava samadhi?

Swami Sivananda: Tukaram was an agricultural peasant. He could not even sign his name. He was always doing sankirtan of Sri Krishna's name, *Vitthala Vitthala*, with cymbals in his hands. He had darshan of Sri Krishna in physical form. His inner sight, *divya drishti*, was opened by sankirtan. His inspiring abhangas are texts for MA students of the Bombay University. Wherefrom did the unlettered Tukaram derive his knowledge? He tapped the fountain of knowledge through sankirtan. He penetrated into the divine source through bhava samadhi that was brought about by deep sankirtan.

Does kirtan help develop the emotional personality?

Swami Satyananda: When a person sings, God also sings. I can say this with confidence; it is guaranteed. When a person feels good so does He, and when he does not feel good, God feels accordingly. If a person wants God to like what he is

doing, he should do good things. When he sings a bhajan in praise of the Divine it should be done with full devotion. This is the basis of receiving God's grace.

In this era people enjoy music, song and dance. In every house and street one can hear music being played. A person should not be surprised if he experiences bhava samadhi while singing kirtan for this can happen as a result of chanting God's name. I have had this experience in many of the musical conferences in and outside of this country. In the western world the boys and girls sing just for pleasure and entertainment, but they also lose their self-awareness as they become so emotional and crazy about the music. Music and kirtan are so powerful that they can free the purusha from prakriti. They can free the *jiva*, the individual soul, from the bondage of maya.

Kirtan can help one reach the highest pinnacle of spiritual experience, more than any yoga or any other means. Through kirtan it is possible to have the vision of the Divine, Self, God, Christ, Mary, Sri Krishna and Sri Rama. Music has so much inherent power that it can free oneself of ego. If one were to follow the above prescription, the element of *ahamkara*, ego, could be totally eliminated. Music has a great power which one should make use of.

KIRTAN AND BHAJAN

What is the difference between a bhajan and a kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: Bhajans and kirtan are different. In kirtan, the singing and repeating of God's name is most important. With bhajans, inspiring teachings and good thoughts are conveyed. They can be the singing of God's glory in the form of a prayer, such as, "O God, giver of bliss, please give us knowledge." Singing God's name is the most powerful form of music, bhakti and devotion. If one sings for one hour with a kartal or mridanga, then one will not need to do japa, pooja or sit for meditation. This is *naman sankirtan*, singing God's name over and over. God

loves music and people love music. Any music will do, even commercial music, provided one actually loses oneself. If one sits for one or two hours and sings, God will be happy.

Bhajans praise and describe God, therefore, in order to gain knowledge of Him and elevate the mind, one should also sing bhajans. If one seeks His mystic vision then the means is through the magic of kirtan. The benefits of kirtan are clearly written in Uttarakand of *Ramacharitamanas* where the Lord inspires one to sing His name for the joy of it, as well as the experience of total concentration. Kirtan is when the mind becomes totally engrossed, when the atma and paramatma connect and become united.

What are the forms and benefits of singing?

Swami Satyananda: Bhajan means ‘to sing the name of God in adoration’. *Stuti* means ‘to praise the Lord’. *Naman sankirtan* means ‘to chant the name of God’. *Naman smaran* means ‘to remember the name of God’. Kirtan is when a person sings about God’s *mahima*, greatness. He sings of God’s attributes, compassion, grace and His ability to take away a person’s sorrow. When he sings *Guru Deva Daya Karake*, it is a bhajan. He is praying to God to be kind and merciful to him. There are different feelings and attitudes towards God. One can pray to Him, praise Him, remember His name or do naman sankirtan. They are all the same thing, just as different sweets are made out of milk. Kirtan is the best sadhana for the people of Kali Yuga.

There is no single way to sing bhajans, just as there is no single way in which thoughts move. The realized sages have spoken of an experience that takes place when they are sitting silently with their eyes and mouth closed. Nothing is happening on the outside, but from within they can hear the sounds of a drum, a conch, a veena, a flute or musical scales. This is called internal sound. There is a song:

*Lagan lagaa kar suno hridaya mein, Shyaam bansee bajaa
rahe hain.*

Listen carefully to your heart, Shyam is playing the flute there.

What is the meaning of this song? Where is Shyam playing the flute? The song is saying that if one listens carefully, the sound of His flute will be heard in one's heart. 'Heart' does not mean the physical heart but *atma*, the spirit that resides within. When one hears the transcendental sound in one's spirit, it is called nada yoga.

Nada yoga means 'the ability to hear internal sounds' – where the experience is happening within and nothing is manifesting on the outside. When something is visible 'inside', it is called *dhyana yoga*. One may see clouds, fire, Sri Krishna, guru, a trident, a damaru, a conch, a snake or something else. God manifests as form and as sound.

How would you define bhajan?

Swami Sivananda: Bhajan is the worship of God. God, love, light, peace, truth, knowledge, bliss and existence are synonymous terms. That secondless Supreme Being who resides in the inner chambers of one's heart as the Inner Ruler, who has no beginning, middle and end, who is all-pervading, who is unchanging, who exists in the past, present and future, who is self-existent, who is independent and who is self-luminous, is God.

Bhajan is meditation on God. Bhajan is worship. In short, all contrivances or methods that are calculated to bring the devotee face to face with God are bhajan. Japa, repetition of His name, sankirtan, singing His name either alone or with a group, and prayer constitute bhajan.

Life without bhajan of some sort or another is absolutely useless. Life without worship is dreary and cheerless. It is mere burden only on this earth. Just as zero is nothing without one in the beginning, so also this life is nothing without bhajan, although one possesses in abundance the objects of this world. This world is a long dream, full of pain and misery. The only real entity is God.

What are the effects of kirtan and bhajan?

Swami Niranjanananda: To train the physical body along with the senses, it is important to sing kirtan and bhajans. Whether one does it individually or as a group makes no difference. Just as the mind is trained through the process of pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and the internal body through the practice of asana, mudra, bandha and the shatkarmas; the senses have also to be tuned and trained through kirtan, through becoming aware of the intensity of a note, its pitch and frequency. Individual singing is good only when one is a perfect master of it. Until then, group singing is the prescribed way. Group kirtan develops the experience of that one vibration because kirtan implies that the body is in tune with the song, whereas bhajan implies that the mind is in tune with the song. This is the difference between kirtan and bhajan.

Kirtan and bhajan are not just short and long. Kirtan is not a two line song and bhajan a twenty line song. The actual meaning behind the word bhajan is that the mind is perfectly in tune with the song. Emotions, thoughts, feelings and one's whole expression, which are mental in nature, are vibrating in harmony with what is being sung. Kirtan is being in tune with the body.

Kirtan leads to bhajan, and bhajan, when the mind is in tune, leads to *manana*, continuous awareness. Ultimately, manana leads to the merger of individual energy with cosmic energy, individual vibration with cosmic vibration.

How did Swami Sivananda's love of kirtan and dance influence you?

Swami Satyananda: Swami Sivananda loved kirtan immensely. When he sang he used to start dancing and become completely inspired and transmuted. Here was a sannyasin, belonging to the highest order of Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy of jnana yoga, dancing like a fool. He was a person who represented the highest philosophy of pure monism, and when I saw him dancing like a madman, I

began to doubt my rational approach to reality. I began to think that my concepts about spiritual life were merely intellectual. My knowledge came from the upper crust of human existence, and gradually I started getting into the mood of singing kirtan.

Who was Narsi Mehta?

Swami Sivananda: Narsi Mehta was a renowned bhakta of Sri Krishna from Gujarat. The bhajans composed by him are sung with great faith and devotion to this day not just in Gujarat but all over the country. Mahatma Gandhi's favourite bhajan, *Vaishnava janatho tene je kahiye*, was a composition of this great saint and devotee. He was born into the Naag Brahmin sect of the Badnagara clan from the city of Junagadh in Kathiawar. At a young age he already spent much time in the company of sadhus. This had a deep impact on him and strong Krishna bhakti took root in his heart. He spent his time singing bhajans and kirtans about the lilas of Sri Krishna and the gopis. This did not find favour with his family and they tried to dissuade him from this but to no avail.

One day his sister-in-law taunted him saying, "If you have such great devotion, why don't you go and meet the Lord?" Narsi Mehta did not take any offence. He rushed off to an ancient Shiva temple on the outskirts of Junagadh where he prayed fervently to Shiva and sang kirtan of his glory. Shiva was so pleased that he appeared before Narsi and transported him to Sri Krishna's Goloka where he witnessed the amazing raslila with the gopis. He was spellbound by the beauty of that divine scene.

After completing his tapasya, he returned to Junagadh and decided to set up an independent household with his wife and children. As he was always engaged in kirtan and bhajan, his household found it difficult to make ends meet and his wife begged him to take some work and earn a living. However, he was just not interested in anything else apart from singing the name of the Divine. Narsi Mehta had

complete trust that Sri Krishna would provide for his family, and that is exactly what happened.

It is said that during the time of his daughter's marriage, everything had been personally taken care of by Sri Krishna. He was present in the marriage hall and conducted the proceedings Himself. In the same way, even his son's wedding was blessed by Sri Krishna's grace and the in-laws were astounded by the riches they saw in this poor Brahmin's home.

The people of his community were envious of this simple devotee's pure, steadfast faith in God and were always trying to cause trouble for him. Once they told him that he must perform the shraadh ceremony for the soul of his late father and invite the whole community for a meal. Narsi Mehta simply appealed to his Lord and all arrangements were taken care of. On the day of the ceremony, there was a shortage of ghee and taking a container, Narsi Mehta went to the market to buy some more. On the way he saw a band of people singing Hari kirtan with deep devotion and fervour. Forgetting about the ghee, Narsi Mehta joined them and soon lost himself in the singing. At home his wife was waiting for his return and the guests had arrived for the feast. Sri Krishna took on the form of Narsi Mehta and brought the ghee for his wife. The ceremony and feast went on perfectly. When Narsi Mehta finally returned home empty-handed he apologized to his wife. She was astounded at the miracle that had just taken place.

After his son and daughter were married, his responsibilities were considerably reduced and he threw himself even more into the singing of bhajan, kirtan and telling stories of God's lilas. Some years later, his wife and son passed away and Narsi Mehta devoted himself completely to his Beloved and the singing of His name. He taught that bhakti towards the Divine and loving all of humanity equally was the best means to attain liberation or moksha.

There is a story about the royal Mandalik clan of Junagadh challenging Narsi Mehta's devotion and dedi-

cation to the Divine. They said that he had to prove his devotion by going to the temple and garlanding the idol of Sri Krishna, asking Him to then garland him with the same garland in return. If he failed to do so, he would be put to death. Narsi spent the whole night in the temple singing and worshipping Sri Krishna and many gathered to see how this test would end. As dawn broke the next day, in the presence of the people the idol of Sri Krishna descended from the altar and garlanded Narsi Mehta with the same garland that he had placed around Him the previous night. It is also said that the Mandalik kings lost their kingdom as punishment for trying to discredit Narsi Mehta's devotion. The luminosity of Narsi Mehta's bhakti spread far and wide and inspired many to walk this path.

How can one discover the omnipresence of bhajan?

Swami Sivananda: All religions do bhajan in their way. The goal is the same, but the paths are different. Even trees, brooks, rivers, the ocean, the gentle breeze, the sun, moon and stars, and birds are doing bhajan silently. They are repeating His name. Rivers repeat *bhum, bhum, bhum*. The breeze utters *Om, Om, Om*. Waves of the ocean repeat *Hari Om* or *Soham*. The sound of *Hari Om* comes out of the mouth of every bird. Even railway trains, engines of factories repeat *Hari Om Tat Sat*.

HOW TO PRACTISE KIRTAN

How does one practise kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: Generally kirtan is conducted in temples or houses. Devotees come together at sunset in temples or they keep a photo of the Divine in a hall, decorate it with flowers and seat themselves in front of the picture in two rows facing one another.

In the beginning *Om* is chanted loudly in chorus by all the devotees three times. Then Ganesha and guru kirtan are sung. One of the devotees sings the names of God

melodiously and others follow him next. This method ensures more attention, harmony and uniformity. This preliminary kirtan lasts for about five minutes. Next the Mahamantra or *Kalisantarara Upanishad* mantra *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare* is repeated for nearly ten minutes. Then the turn comes for all other devotees to sing and lead the kirtan individually. They sing for a definite period. It is beneficial to keep five to ten minutes as the minimum time. When the devotees have sung kirtan, it is concluded with prayers for world peace and repetition of the Shanti Mantra.

What is naman sankirtan?

Swami Sivananda: The Sanskrit verb *krit* means ‘praising’. Kirtan is commonly known as a certain type and method of melodious singing, particularly singing Sri Krishna’s name and lila. Only praising the name of God and His lila in melody for the purpose of keeping the flame of bhakti burning in one’s heart can be termed kirtan.

Kirtan can be classified as naman sankirtan and lila kirtan or rasa kirtan. ‘Singing the names of the Divine in melody’ is named *naman sankirtan*. The main sadhana of the nine limbs of bhakti yoga is naman sankirtan. The influence and utility of this are highly appreciated among the Vaishnavas of Bengal and among all religious cults of India. They think that the essence of religion in Kali Yuga is naman sankirtan – *kalau namansankirtanat*. Singing Hari’s name aloud is sankirtan. From this, prema or love blossoms and a devotee forgets the existence of the outer world while he sincerely sings the name of God. This is called *avesha*. A bhakta attains samadhi by singing God’s names just as a yogi does through yoga sadhana. The primary aim of naman sankirtan is to attain prema and the main aim of the Vaishnava cult is to generate this prema. It is said that when Chaitanya did naman sankirtan dipped in prema thousands accompanied him.

When the mind is attracted towards the Lord, the heart experiences a selfless, blissful state and this is called *rati*.

When this rati attains a greater hold, it is termed prema. The devotee does not wish for moksha because even asking for or wanting moksha is a type of vasana and selfishness. When God is the only object of attainment, what else can be desired? The purpose of naman sankirtan is the purification of the heart and it is both the method and the goal as the Name and the Named are one and the same.

What is lila kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: The activities of various periods and circumstances of Sri Krishna are termed *lila*, divine play. Any song composed and sung on such lila is known as *lila kirtan* or *rasa kirtan*. Some are fond of naman sankirtan and others of lila kirtan. It is ascribed to Gouranga Chaitanya that lilarasa should be tasted in the company of intimates whereas harinama sankirtan should be preached and practised among the general public, lest those who are not deeply immersed in Krishna bhakti misunderstand or misconstrue the significance of the divine lila. However, it is difficult to judge the attainments of the general public. If God's name gives one pleasure it is but natural. Singing God's qualities and His lilas should give one equal pleasure. Whatever floods the heart with bliss is termed *rasa*.

Dancing to the accompaniment of musical instruments like mridanga, a special type of drum, and manjira, cymbals, are integral parts of kirtan. The kirtan may end with:

*Om purnamada purnamidam purnat purnamudachyate
Purnasya purnamadaya purnamevavasishyate.*

Then there should be common meditation for a few minutes, followed by arati to the picture of the Divine and distribution of sacred prasad.

How to practise kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: I observed that most of the time the dholak or drum, and other instruments made a lot of noise, whereas they should only be used to give the beat.

When kirtan is sung, there should be a change towards one-pointedness and *shanti*, peace. Naman sankirtan is when ten, twenty-five or thirty people sit down and sing God's name. Singing the story of God is also important. In the *Ramacharitamanas*, Shiva explains the importance of the story of Sri Rama (Uttarakand, after doha 128, chau 3 and 1):

*Mana kaamanaa siddhi nara paavaa,
Je yaha kathaa kapata taji gaavaa.
Kahahi sunahi anumodana karahee,
Te gopada iva bhavanidhi tarahee.*

*Raama kathaa girijaa mai baranee,
Kali mala samani manomala haranee.*

That man achieves fulfilment of his desires
Who sings this story abandoning desires and deceit.
Those who listen to it and recommend it
Cross this world-ocean as if it were the footprints of a cow. (3)

O Girija, I have described the story of Rama,
Which is able to alienate the filth of Kali Yuga
And also erase the defects of the mind. (1)

When the dholak and cymbals make a lot of noise, I do not consider it to be kirtan. There has to be rhythm, melody and a proper symphony of music. Gradually the tempo goes high and low, high and low, high and low and one unites with God.

Kirtan is the practice of singing God's name with a group of people. The kirtan has a particular rhythm and is sung for hours or a number of days without stopping. It is one of the methods for coming into communion with the Self. The rhythm of kirtan has a hypnotic effect that can cause many people to fall into a trance-like state and experience ecstasy. However, kirtan as a practice of bhakti yoga has some limitations as it requires a length of time, and people's complexes prevent them from giving themselves completely over to the singing. Japa yoga would work better for these people.

Why is kirtan meant for more than just enjoyment?

Swami Satyananda: Music is sankirtan yoga or nada yoga, the yoga of sound. It is not only the way to shanti or relaxation; it is a way to samadhi. When music is enjoyed through the senses it is just a source of sensual pleasure. If a person can give himself totally to the music then the mind transcends its relationship with the senses. When a person plugs his ears, he should be able to receive the vibrations of music through the skin and his soul will dance with it.

Kirtan is a branch of bhakti yoga. It is a special science and not merely singing. There comes a time in kirtan when a person completely loses control over his normal consciousness. When this experience takes place he may dance or do anything. Kirtan has been considered one of the most fantastic ways for experiencing this consciousness called kundalini.

There was a time when I used to sing kirtan eight to ten hours every day. When the kirtan was alive with lots of drums, piano, harmonium, cymbals, clapping and jumping it was easy for me to lose myself. I would forget that I was Swami Satyananda; I was neither male nor female. Kirtan develops a quality of consciousness where one becomes nothing! The point of singing God's name is divine intoxication, divine ecstasy.

Harinaam ka pyala peekar aur pilakar ban ja tu matavala.

Drink the glass of wine filled with God's name, serve it to others and become ecstatic.

If a person could sing just one line of kirtan for three to four hours, he would enter into bhava samadhi. The *Ramacharitamanas* proclaims:

Who will get the darshan of the Lord,
Who will have His mystic vision and
Who will attain liberation?
It is the one who sings His name in kirtan.

Should people be dancing during kirtan?

Swami Niranjanananda: It has been said that kirtan is the way in Kali Yuga. Kirtan is meditation; kirtan is not a wild dance. Kirtan is a meditative process. The purpose of kirtan is to awaken the aspect of memory which remembers one's true Self. It is to awaken that aspect of memory which connects one with the vibration, peace and joy within. Therefore, it becomes a powerful tool when one allows kirtan to come alive within. When the movements follow the vibrations of the kirtan, then kirtan is meditation. In that meditation there can be fun also, yet it is not a wild fun. It is internal fun which one experiences within oneself.

In the early days of the ashram, there used to be akhanda kirtan the whole night with Sri Swami Satyananda. Somebody would start swaying; somebody would start standing and dancing. Gradually, that *bhava*, that sentiment, would come and people would go into bhava samadhi. Swami Satyananda used to fall down in samadhi from singing; but that bhava samadhi was an act of internalization, not a wild dance.

Kirtan is a spontaneous awakening of prana shakti. When that prana shakti awakens spontaneously the chakras can open. Therefore, kirtan is a meditative process which allows one to awaken one's shakti.

Is correct pronunciation of the mantras in kirtan important?

Swami Niranjanananda: Correct pronunciation is considered to be important. If there is intensity, concentration and clarity in the practice, the mantra will work more effectively and it will alter the mental frame, the mental attitude, the mental behaviour. This also applies to kirtan. Sometimes singers make changes in the kirtan according to the pronunciation they are accustomed to, so they should try to pay attention to this.

What advice is there for someone who has little time to devote to kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: A person does not have to spend more time singing bhajans, but he needs to do it regularly. He shouldn't do it for two hours one day and then forget about it.

Kirtan is held in many places and whenever it is happening, one should go and join in. Small groups of sadhus sit together and sing kirtan and one can also go to a gurudwara for kirtan. One can take at least one day off in a week, be it Monday or Sunday. All days are auspicious for remembering God; there is no special day reserved for God's service.

One could also go and tape the kirtan, bring it home and play it to the children and other family members. One can sing kirtan anywhere – at home, in a social gathering or at any auspicious get-together. This is a good way to inculcate good habits in children. One should start slowly by devoting ten to fifteen minutes daily to kirtan. This new routine will help to make kirtan one's second nature.

The path of sankirtan is the simplest, easiest and surest sadhana, with the least risk and expense. Kirtan means chanting the name of God – Allah, Rama, Govinda, or guru. Whatever name one chooses, one should sing it slowly and continue to build the crescendo. In the beginning the mind stays outside, but as the rhythm increases it slowly starts to go within and one becomes more and more immersed. One does not have to make any special arrangements nor have a harmonium or dholak, but it is good to have a manjira.

One can sing God's name at any time, one does not need to fix an hour for this. One can sing kirtan while working in the kitchen, tending the children, having a bath or when fighting with one's spouse. When cooking or travelling the mind is continuously thinking, so instead of letting the mind become absorbed in thoughts, it should be immersed in kirtan.

GURU NANAK

How did Guru Nanak express bhakti in his early life?

Swami Sivananda: Kalu, Nanak's father, tried his level best to turn Nanak's mind towards worldly matters. He gave Nanak the work of looking after the cultivation of the land. Nanak did not pay any attention to his work. He meditated even in the fields. He went out to tend the cattle, but centred his mind on the worship of God. The cattle trespassed into a neighbour's field. Kalu rebuked Nanak for his idleness. Nanak replied, "I am not idle, but am busy in guarding my own fields." Kalu asked him, "Where are your fields?" Nanak replied, "My body is a field. The mind is the ploughman. Righteousness is the cultivation. Modesty is water for irrigation. I have sown the field with the seed of the sacred name of the Lord. Contentment is my field's harrow. Humility is its hedge. The seeds will germinate into a good crop with love and devotion. Fortunate is the house in which such a crop is brought! O father, mammon will not accompany us to the next world. It has infatuated the whole world, but there are few who understand its delusive nature."

Then Kalu put him in charge of a small shop. Nanak distributed the goods to sadhus and poor people. He would give away in charity whatever he could lay his hands on in his father's house and in the shop. Nanak said, "My shop is made of time and space. Its store consists of the commodities of truth and self-control. I am always dealing with my customers, the sadhus and mahatmas, contact with whom is very profitable indeed."

When Nanak was fifteen years of age, his father gave him twenty rupees and said, "Nanak, go to the market and purchase some profitable commodity." Kalu sent his servant Bala to accompany Nanak. Nanak and Bala reached Chuhar Kana, a village about twenty miles from Talwandi. Nanak met a party of fakirs. He thought within himself, "Let me feed these fakirs now. This is the most profitable bargain I

can make.” He purchased provisions immediately and fed them sumptuously. Then he came back to his house. The servant informed his master of his son’s bargain. Kalu was very annoyed. He gave a slap on Nanak’s face.

The father thought that Nanak did not like sedentary work, therefore he said to Nanak, “O dear son! Ride on a horse and do travelling business. This will suit you nicely.” Nanak replied, “Revered father! My trade is divine knowledge. The profits are the purseful of good deeds with which I can certainly reach the domain of the Divine.” Then Kalu Chand told Nanak, “If you do not like trade or business you may serve in some office.” Nanak replied, “I am already a servant of God. I am endeavouring to do my duty honestly and wholeheartedly in the service of my God. I carry out His behests implicitly. I desire fervently to get the reward of divine grace from God by serving Him untiringly and incessantly.” On hearing this, the father became silent.

How did Guru Nanak express atmabhava as a child?

Swami Satyananda: When Guru Nanak was a child he used to go to school. If he saw his classmates without proper clothes, he would give them his own clothes to wear. If he learnt that a boy had no blanket, he would take some warm clothes from his home, without his father’s knowledge, and give them to that boy. He had great kindness, compassion, affection and love for his fellow beings.

What was the essence of Guru Nanak’s teachings?

Swami Satyananda: Guru Nanak was always travelling across India, sometimes in the Middle East and sometimes in China or Japan. He went to Mecca as well. His teaching was that there is no place God is not. God is in the east, west, north and south. He is above and below. He is omnipresent. When people die, whether they are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, theist or atheist, they go to the same place. There is no separate heaven for Christians, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs.

How did Guru Nanak help people become more sincere?

Swami Satyananda: Guru Nanak once accepted an invitation from a Muslim ruler and his minister to attend a service at a local mosque. It was a large congregation and when the prayers were offered everyone knelt. Only Nanak remained standing and took no part in the service. When it was over, the ruler and his minister turned to Nanak and said angrily, "You are an impostor! You said that you would offer prayers along with us." "Yes, that is true," said Nanak, "I did promise to pray with you, but since you were not praying, how could I?" "Such blasphemy, explain yourself!" they cried. "Does praying merely consist of kneeling and bowing?" asked the guru. "No, of course not," replied the minister, "That is only the outer expression. It is the inner worship that is important." "That is exactly what I meant," said Nanak. "While the service was going on, you were thinking of your mare and the birth of its foal. You were thinking that the foal might fall into the well." The minister bowed his head in shame. It was true. "And what about me?" asked the nawab. "Oh, you were busy with the horse which your agents are purchasing in Kabul." The nawab confessed that this was perfectly true and the whole congregation was struck dumb with amazement.

It is so easy to fall into this trap, and the trap is not thinking about other things, as there is nothing wrong with these everyday affairs. The trap lies in the fact that one can so easily fool oneself into believing that this is worship, or that this is bhakti, or that one is an ardent bhakta.

This is the trap of self-deception. It is far better to think of all these things while simultaneously knowing that the worship is not really an expression of bhakti. This is honesty and is far preferable to self-deception. In fact, a person who is honest with himself and his motives and who practises no yoga or follows no religion, is more likely to expand his awareness than a person who deceives himself while praying or performing rituals for twenty-four hours a day. It is the sincerity that is important.

What was Guru Nanak's teaching?

Swami Satyananda: The Sikh religion was founded in Punjab by a great saint, Guru Nanak. He was from a Kayastha family in Punjab. From childhood he was interested in God. Later on, he did not live at home; he wandered here and there. Two disciples lived with him, Bala and Mardana, and he took them with him wherever he went. The Sikh religion has but one aim – devotion to God. Live as you like, but sing the name of the Divine. You may do business and trade, you may have children, you may farm, you may do whatever you want to do, only sing the name of God as well. This is their main teaching.

During the time of Guru Nanak, there were others like him and they carried the same message. Mirabai and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu said, “Sing the name of the Lord, nothing else is needed. Remain engrossed in God, do everything for God. Maybe you are a householder, a farmer, a cobbler, a carpenter, a potter, a tanner or a blacksmith. No matter what work you do, do not forget God.” Even if a mother goes out to fill her pot with water, she never forgets her child. She will be constantly aware that her child does not fall down somewhere.

AKHANDA KIRTAN

What is akhanda kirtan and what are the benefits of the practice?

Swami Sivananda: *Akhanda* means ‘continuous’ or ‘without break’. Kirtan means singing God's name. Akhanda kirtan is the continuous singing of God's name. Akhanda kirtan is a very effective spiritual sadhana. There is eradication of negative vrittis during this period. The mind can be easily controlled and the wandering habit of the mind towards sensual objects can be easily checked by akhanda kirtan. The mind has neither time nor opportunity to think of sensual objects. Akhanda kirtan is a potent and easy means to capture the mind and fill it with sattwa. There is supreme peace and joy in akhanda kirtan.

Akhanda kirtan brings communion or samadhi quickly. It purifies the heart and mind quickly and produces other incalculable benefits. To induce samadhi and the mood of divine ecstasy quickly, there is no other agent more powerful than akhanda kirtan. In Jhansi, and other places in Uttar Pradesh, there have been akhanda kirtans for two months, three months, six months and even for one full year.

There is no yajna greater than akhanda kirtan. In Kali Yuga a well-conducted akhanda kirtan is tantamount to one hundred Ashwamedha sacrifices. If one weighs the fruit obtained by conducting an akhanda kirtan in one scale, and the fruit of one hundred Ashwamedha yajnas in the other scale, the former will go down. This is especially suited for this Iron Age. During akhanda kirtan the Mahamantra, *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*, should be repeated.

At the end of Dwapara Yuga, Sage Narada went to Brahma, the Creator, and wanted to know the easiest means of crossing the ocean of samsara in the Kali Yuga. Brahma replied that by repetition of the Mahamantra, consisting of sixteen names, a person can easily overcome samsara. These names destroy the *avarana*, the covering or veil, which produces the sense of individuality of the jiva, surrounded by the sixteen *kalas*, rays. Then like the sphere of the sun, which shines fully after the clouds disperse, Para Brahman alone shines. No rules are to be observed in the repetition of these names. Brahma also said, “Whosoever, in a pure or an impure state, utters these mantras always attains the same: the world of, the proximity to, the form of, or the absorption into Brahman. He is at once released from all bondage.”

What instructions are there for conducting an akhanda kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: Akhanda kirtan should be conducted during holidays in villages, mohallas and cities. Akhanda kirtan can be arranged for twelve hours, twenty-four hours and up to one week or even more, according to convenience.

The akhanda kirtan may commence at 4 am or 6 pm. The former is better and the longer the period, the better the effect.

One can conduct akhanda kirtan for twenty-four hours, even with four, six or eight members. There is no necessity for changing batches. All can sit together and sing continuously. Some people like to conduct akhanda kirtan without a person to lead them. Everyone sings together; however, the members may become tired soon. If one singer leads, there is rest for the leader and the others also. This is a better method.

What are the guidelines for akhanda kirtan of the Mahamantra?

Swami Sivananda: Batches of twenty or more can conduct akhanda kirtan. After every two hours, batches can be changed. There should be no break in the kirtan. There must be perfect harmony throughout. The Mahamantra should be sung in a sweet melodious tune. Members should have preliminary training for some time in kirtan. Untrained people will produce breaks. Particularly those who wish to lead the party should have a good training. If there are breaks, it is no longer an akhanda kirtan. Great care should be taken to keep the continuity of the kirtan. The person who leads must be ever vigilant and take his turn the very second the other party breaks. There must be perfect discipline.

One person should repeat the mantra in a melodious sweet tune and the others should follow him in chorus. The sixteen names, *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*, constitute one mantra. One should not repeat or sing either *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*, or *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*, twice. For individual japa and kirtan, the whole mantra should be repeated at a stretch, but during akhanda kirtan, in order to avoid too much strain and break, the first half of the mantra, *Hare*

Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, should be repeated by the person who leads the kirtan, and when it is followed in chorus by the party, the other half should be repeated. The same half should not be repeated twice.

No break in the kirtan should be caused between the time when the leader of the party ends the kirtan and the others following him in chorus begin it. Some people cannot sing even one half of the mantra without a break. They should train themselves to sing one half of the mantra without any break in the middle. Especially those who lead the kirtan should take particular care of this point; otherwise it cannot be an akhanda kirtan. Thus the continuity of the kirtan can be maintained. Those who lead the sankirtan should sing in the same tune. Change of tune will induce a break in the kirtan and there will be no harmony.

What are the practical points to be considered for akhanda kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: After every hour the person who leads the kirtan can be changed and another person can take up his place. The period for each member can be from half an hour to one hour. It is better to keep thirty minutes for each singer after midnight as sleep overcomes after that time. The program as to who should guide the kirtan at each particular hour should be prearranged and the program distributed beforehand. He who leads must stand up and sing. He can overcome sleep by standing. Those who are on the verge of being overpowered by sleep must stand up and sing.

In akhanda kirtan, one should not sing in a high pitch. One becomes tired soon. If one sings in a low tone, the members do not take much interest. There is no enthusiasm and joy. One has to sing in a happy, medium tone.

At times there may not be a sufficient number of people to follow the kirtan in chorus. In that case the kirtan can be continued by a single person. Only when a reliever comes and relieves him could he leave the hall. The reliever at the time of taking charge should sing with the other person

who is already doing the kirtan, at least for five minutes and then only the former person can leave the hall. Harmonium or kartals could be used especially when a single person conducts the kirtan. Kirtanists may either sit and do kirtan, or go round the idol or photo which is kept in the hall. During cough and other natural obstructions of the throat, kirtan can be done mentally, but if the break exceeds a few seconds a reliever should be called for through some sign or ringing the bell which is specially kept for this purpose. Night shift kirtanists should invariably sleep in or near the kirtan hall. They are highly benefited by mantric vibrations. The kirtanist should not talk to anybody until his turn is finished. The kirtan should generally be done with closed eyes. Turning the head to the sides should be avoided and only the image should be gazed at.

When one does kirtan the image of Sri Krishna, Hari or Sri Rama should be placed in one's heart and the mind should be fixed on the image. There should be *akhanda deepak*, a ghee-lamp, in front of the picture in the hall until the function is over. One person should be in charge of the ghee-lamp and see that it burns continuously until the function is over.

There must be two persons to inspect the members. Members will be overpowered by sleep in the late hours of the night and these inspectors should watch over them and keep them vigilant. Difficulty will be experienced in keeping vigil. Many will begin to sleep at 2 am. Those who take part in akhanda kirtan should not take tea. They can take a cup of hot milk at midnight. All singers should be present at the time of the beginning and ending of the akhanda kirtan.

Those who participate in akhanda kirtan should observe strict continence, *Brahmacharya*. They should take sattwic diet. They can take fruit, milk, potatoes, phalahara. If they can give up salt and sugar for four days, it is a good tapas for them, for here is a chance to give up that inordinate, indiscriminate clinging to salt and sugar. They can take milk without sugar. They can take potatoes without salt. This helps

to control the mischievous *indriya*, sense organ – the tongue. If the tongue is conquered, the other indriyas can be easily controlled. Those who cannot undergo the above discipline can take their usual food.

Those who take part in akhanda kirtan should wear clothes washed by their own hands. They should walk barefoot to the place where the yajna is held. They should not sleep immediately after the kirtan is over.

How should one end the akhanda kirtan?

Swami Sivananda: There should be a separate platform for akhanda kirtan when conferences are held. A red cloth with the Mahamantra written thereon should be hung in the place where akhanda kirtan is conducted.

The akhanda kirtan should terminate with havan and the chanting of the Mahamantra, Gayatri and *Bhagavad Gita* verses. The next morning, barley, rice, dried coconut pieces, dried grapes or raisins, dried dates and ghee should be well mixed. A portion of this is given to the members. This mixture is thrown into the sacrificial fire as *ahuti* or oblations uttering the sacred mantras and the word *swaha* at the end of each mantra. If one hundred malas of japa of the Mahamantra are done during akhanda kirtan, ten malas, one tenth of ahutis or oblations should be offered during the havan. Havan should end with poornahuti and the chanting of the Shanti Mantra:

*Om purnamadah purnamidam purnat purnamudachyate,
Purnasya pumamadaya purnamevavasishyate.*

For poornahuti, one full coconut filled with ghee, covered with a red piece of cloth and dipped in ghee is offered with the above mantra. The *havan bhasma*, sacred ash, should be preserved in a tin and distributed to the members and other people. Application of this bhasma with faith and bhava on the forehead removes many incurable diseases. The function should be closed with arati and distribution of prasad. At the close of akhanda kirtan yajna, mahatmas, sadhus, sannyasins and the poor should be sumptuously fed.

Blessed is the place where akhanda kirtans are held. Twice blessed are those who arrange for such a religious sacrifice or yajna. Thrice blessed are those who partake in it and drink the divine nectar by repeating the sweet names of the Divine.

Can akhanda kirtan lead to the state of samadhi?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the state of sahaja samadhi, one hour of sitting can extend into many hours, or a short sitting can transport the mind momentarily to a dimension beyond the body. This also happens during kirtan when people stand up, dance and fall down. Sometimes they cry and scream, yet this is not primal screaming therapy, it is kirtan therapy. In kirtan that state is known as bhava samadhi, which occurs when absorption is experienced due to the linking of an emotion.

This state can occur at any time. I remember once in the 1970s I was travelling in an open truck with Sri Swami Satyananda and many devotees. They began singing kirtan and dancing in the back of the moving truck. I was only a child then and I was really frightened that they would fall off the truck and be killed. The singing and dancing was totally uncontrolled and I felt even more frightened because Sri Swamiji himself was involved, singing kirtan and dancing while the truck was going down the road at forty miles per hour, which was quite a high speed on those roads.

Somehow four or five of us got together and stood in the corners of the back of the truck, holding long poles. Each time someone came close to the edge, they were whacked back into the centre of the truck. After two hours there was a pile of bodies in the middle of the truck. The driver and the swamis who were sitting in the front of the truck were totally oblivious to what was happening in the back due to the noise of the engine.

During akhanda or uninterrupted kirtan, people fall down and remain in a state of reverie or ecstasy for several hours, and then drift off to sleep, waking the next morning

in the garden, the sadhana hall or a room. That is sahaja samadhi, which can happen spontaneously when there is some kind of link with the higher reality or with any of the attributes that are expressed in life. A feeling, an emotion or an idea can take one to that level provided there is intensity and total *samapatti* or absorption.

Why did Swami Sivananda initiate the twenty-four hour sankirtan at the Rishikesh ashram?

Swami Satyananda: Swami Sivananda's life was filled with many incidents. His life was different from most of the sannyasins I have come across. His heart was large. He was happiest when he was feeding and giving to people. His only philosophy in life was: God's name is real and everything else is unreal.

Swami Sivananda said, "Whenever one starts an ashram or any such project, one should begin with God's name." So he started unbroken Ram naman sankirtan: *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*. For this purpose a small temple with a hall was constructed and two lamps were lit. The kirtan was sung continuously every day for twenty-four hours and it was the duty of the sannyasins to sing for one hour daily.

Swami Sivananda was a lover of Sri Rama's name and a devotee of kirtan. He sang really well, his voice was sweet and powerful. He composed songs in English, Hindi, Tamil and Sanskrit. He would often sing in English and he compiled a book in English called *Inspiring Songs and Kirtans*. Swamiji loved music and classical dance and his first question to anyone who came to meet him was, "Can you sing? Can you dance? Okay, let's have a performance this evening." Musicians from North and South India would come to him.

When the Rishikesh ashram was still in its infancy, he started akhanda kirtan, unbroken naman sankirtan. There was always a person instructed to sing the naman sankirtan. This kirtan has been sung continuously until today.

When Swamiji delivered his inaugural address on the day of starting the kirtan, he said, “This kirtan will continue as long as the world lasts.” The akhanda kirtan is still going on in the Rishikesh ashram and it is the greatest accomplishment! As far as I know, the ashram was developed around this resolve of Swami Sivananda. In those days people were admitted to the ashram because many people were needed to sing the Name for twenty-four hours. This great sankalpa of Swami Sivananda, to keep the kirtan continuous for as long as the world lasts, was the nucleus for the great work, the great establishment, the great creation that has taken place in Rishikesh and around the world.

What was Swami Satyananda’s experience of akhanda kirtan at his guru’s ashram?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Sivanandashram akhanda kirtan was going for twenty-four hours, day in and day out. The Mahamantra was repeated in the Bhajan Hall before two burning lamps. In the beginning there were only four or five swamis to conduct the kirtan and Swami Satyananda had to do kirtan sometimes six or eight hours a day continuously. Once he relieved all his gurubhais and sat down in the Bhajan Hall from morning to evening singing the mantra. He had a nice experience while doing that and afterwards when he went to his room and lay down, he felt wide awake. He tried to simply be aware of his body; instead of experiencing his physical body, he experienced the body made of light particles. That experience continued all night.

TUKARAM

How did Tukaram become a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Tukaram was born in 1608 in a village called Dehu in Pune district. The family had accepted Vithoba of Pandharpur for worship and they had constructed a temple of their own dedicated to Vitobha. Just thirteen years old, Tukaram began the management of household

affairs and carried them out to the satisfaction of everybody. After the death of his parents in 1625, all enthusiasm of worldly life left Tukaram. He tried his hand at several ventures of trade and always came back either with empty hands or with a loss.

As a consequence of the many misfortunes, Tukaram was so much disgusted with life that he left his house and village and disappeared into the Bhamnath forest nearby. For fifteen days he stayed there concentrating on the Almighty without food, water or sleep. After the fifteenth day, he realized his Supreme Self and Vithoba visited him in His true form.

Now Tukaram had no love for his household, wife or relations, and he began to spend his life, day and night, in bhajan and kirtan. He described his mind at that time thus:

O God! Kindly grant that I should never forget You.
My body is made up of the five elements which I have
borrowed for the duration of my life and which I have
to return with interest at the end. My conclusion is
that there is no well-wisher for me other than You, O
Panduranga!

The divine art of making poems came naturally to Tukaram and as they were of the nature of bhakti, people began to be more and more attracted to Tukaram, more so as he did not seek anything materially for himself or for his own worldly welfare.

What was Tukaram's deepest wish?

Swami Sivananda: Tukaram always advocated saguna bhakti in the form of repeating God's name and in the form of bhajan, singing His praises. He said that bhakti was the higher form of devotion and service, and was even higher than *mukti*, final liberation.

One day, a Brahmin wanted to read Saint Mukund Raj's book *Viveka Sindhu* with Tukaram, so as to get the benefit of Tukaram's explanation and advice, and thereby obtain self-realization and oneness with Brahman. Tukaram agreed.

The Brahmin went on reading and Tukaram closed his eyes and went on doing his own japa with concentration. After an hour or two, the Brahmin was annoyed at Tukaram's indifference and told him so bitterly. Tukaram without losing his temper in the least, told the Brahmin thus in a poem:

It is just for this reason that I go to the forests leaving behind the house and these things. I want to avoid oneness with God. I do not want to lose my love towards the image of God. If I obtain self-realization, all my desire for doing bhajan and kirtan will vanish. I do not wish this to happen. I do not wish to hear the voice advocating Advaita.

On another occasion, Tukaram sang:

I want this relation to be firmly fixed between us: You the Master, I the servant; You on the high pedestal, I at Your feet. Give me, O Lord, only this gift that I shall never forget You, that I shall always sing Your praises with affection.

What was Tukaram's last request to the villagers?

Swami Sivananda: Many wonderful events are said to have occurred in Tukaram's life. His fame spread throughout the land, but he himself remained unaffected by all that. He knew the exact time when he would depart from this world. On hearing that his death was nearing, the people of the whole village assembled around him and he exhorted them thus:

Though you all bear the responsibilities of family life, never forget Pandurang. Never forget to worship Him and sing His praises. Pandharpur is very near you. It is the Vaikuntha on this earth. Go and worship the Lord there. It is my experience that the name of the Lord alone will save you at the time of death. All of you have protected and maintained me in your midst for such a

long time. I can never repay you and I am very grateful to you. I shall ever pray to Vithoba to bless you all and take you all to heaven after this life. This is my goodbye to you all and this is my advice to you.

I prostrate before you and beseech you with tears never to forget the name of the Lord. Always do kirtan and bhajan of Narayana. Do not be anxious about your material welfare. The Lord will look to it. This is all ephemeral. The Lord's name is eternal. Depend on it only. Ever sing the praises of the Lord. Do japa of *Ramakrishna Hari* and He will always save you. This is my last request and advice to you.

Thus passed away one of the great saints of Maharashtra with God's name on his lips, singing praises of Him. Tulkaram left this world in the year 1649 when he was forty-one years old. It is believed that Vishnu sent His own chariot and servants to take Tukaram to His abode.



2

Anushthana

Moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, that is bhakti yoga.

—*Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*

WHAT IS ANUSHTHANA?

What is anushthana?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Anushthana* means two things: religious worship and spiritual practice.

What is the meaning of anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: *Anushthana* means ‘the performance, observance and accomplishment of an act, with absolute discipline, according to either a self-chosen or a prescribed and detailed plan’. The plan usually includes items pertaining to: the time element, geographical place, type and number of asana, type of mala, weather conditions, recommended diet, duration, rules and regulations, and types of japa anushthana.

The *sankalpa*, resolve, to do a particular act with absolute discipline according to a definite plan, pertaining to the above items, is called anushthana. When anushthana pertains to japa, it is called *japa anushthana*. When it pertains to the study of books on philosophy or spiritual science, it is

called *jnana anushthana*. When it pertains to the observance of austerities, it is called *tapasya anushthana*.

What is the aim of practising anushthana and how does one go about it?

Swami Sivananda: Anushthana is a practice of austerity. It is the observance of certain disciplines for the sake of obtaining an object of desire. The desire or the object may even be final emancipation. One who performs anushthana has to be free from worldly engagements until the end of the anushthana. He should be completely engrossed in one thought and that is the thought concerned with the austere performance of the observances prescribed by the shastras or scriptures. Such disciplines mould the aspirant and make him fit to realize higher objects of his desires and ambitions.

Generally the highest form of anushthana is unselfish worship of God for the sake of self-purification and final emancipation. There is no anushthana better than this. Other anushthanas done for the sake of petty material ends are the outcome of ignorance and are not spiritual. Spiritual anushthana is based on discrimination and has for its ideal the liberation of the soul from the round of birth and death.

What is the purpose of anushthana?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one has decided not to eat chocolate for four months and every night one goes to sleep in a chocolate factory – how much restraint is one able to maintain? As long as there is the smell, the sight, the taste, everything will entice and one will be fighting with oneself. The outside adjustment must happen and that is the discipline, anushthana. Anushthana means fine-tuning the subtle personality. Anushthana does not mean an imposed system or imposed discipline, but fine-tuning of one's subtle nature, the subtle personality. Gradually the mind is freed of self-association, 'I' association or 'I' identification. The more one is free from 'I' identification, more and more faith is generated.

What are the various kinds of anushtana?

Swami Satyananda: There are many kinds of anushtana, yet the two most important are sadhana anushtana and purascharana. An example of sadhana anushtana is Navaratri in which a special japa is done on nine days, bland simple food is taken and no work is done. In purascharana, japa is done as many lakh (100,000) times as the number of syllables in the mantra.

On an auspicious day, a sankalpa or vow is taken to do a certain number of rounds of japa. It is a sacred vow. The aspirant knows that he can spare an hour or so every day, and can do four or five malas in that time, which means five hundred repetitions of the mantra per day, 15,000 in one month and 150,000 in ten months. In this way the purascharana will be completed in five to six years. The minimum sankalpa can be made, but it has to be fixed and then completed accordingly in one, two, eight, nine or ten years. If a person has more time, he can do a few more malas, as in Shravan or Navaratri, or maybe he can take a day off from work. In this way the long-term purascharana can be completed over a few years. This is as prescribed by the vedic dharma.

What are the effects of anushtana?

Swami Satyananda: Anushtana should be done with faith and sincerity, not for the sake of curiosity, testing or with a fault-finding attitude. If no effect is seen even after seven anushtanas, due to some internal impurity or obstruction brought about by past karma, one's faith should not lessen. If there are too many inner obstacles, the effect may not manifest soon. Even if the effect does not manifest materially, there is no doubt as to the great purification done by the anushtana. Further, if the anushtana is done with nishkama bhava there is no doubt about self-purification and the descent of divine grace. There is no action which does not produce an effect.

What then is to be said about the effect of an action like the *Bhagavad Gita* anushtana which is done with faith

and concentration of mind? The effect is indubitable. It is advisable, according to the words of the Lord, to abandon all motives and do the anushthana with nishkama bhava, for the sake of God-realization alone and nothing else.

When several japa anushthanas are performed over a number of years, certain forces are released and great energy is stored within the disciple. If japa anushthana is performed for self-purification and spiritual progress the energy released will be used for that process and directed towards that aim.

What should be the goal of the anushthana?

Swami Sivananda: An ishta mantra is selected first. The object of japa anushthana should be within the limits of the mantra chosen; for example, one should not do japa of Hanuman to beget a son. Foolish desires should not be cherished when performing anushthana. Japa anushthana should not be practised to destroy or harm other beings. This is a great blunder, which will lead to the destruction of the performer, if the other party is more powerful. Generally a sublime spiritual desire should be kept in view when any anushthana is practised.

Anushthana disciplines the mind and prepares the mind for yogic meditation. It is a severe tapasya which, if not performed with any worldly desire, will lead the sadhaka to the height of spiritual illumination.

How can one make sure to follow through on a resolve to do anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: Trying to move too fast is the cause of not being able to follow through on a resolve. Slow and steady wins the race. When making a resolution, an aspirant should first try to see how long he can keep it. He should not be over-enthusiastic or over-emotional.

The aspirant must start with smaller resolves, and attempt smaller anushthanas in the beginning. Try a two-day, nine-day, eleven-day and then a month-long sadhana.

The willpower has to be strengthened gradually, and then a resolve can be made for a longer or more difficult sadhana. Divine help is also needed in sadhana. An auspicious task cannot be accomplished without divine assistance. Without God's grace, nothing can be achieved. I have performed many sadhanas in my life and have always been able to complete them. When I performed the panchagni sadhana, God said, "I must help Swami Satyananda." On what basis did He say this?

I had already resolved that the fruit of my sadhana should not come to me. This was my first resolve. If a farmer resolves that the produce from his farm should be for anyone who needs it, he will have a good harvest. However, that is a difficult resolution to make. If he does not gather the produce, why should he plough the field or sow seeds? People work for themselves; no one works for others. I resolved that I did not want the fruit of my sadhana. I only wanted to be able to perform it faultlessly for nine years without any obstacles.

Material attainment should not be the only aim of householder life. The aim of education should not only be to get a job and earn an income. One should be able to think of others. Let one's prayer be that whatever God gives will not only be used to look after the family, but more than that for the wellbeing of others.

JAPA

What is japa?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Japa* is 'constant and continuous remembrance or awareness'. The japa or repetition of guru mantra or *ishta mantra*, mantra on a chosen form of divinity one is devoted to, is practised for concentrating and internalizing the mind and for making the consciousness subtle. The mantra is repeated a certain number of times depending upon the method of worship.

What is the role of precautions when undertaking anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: Any practice that liberates the higher forces without giving self-control is disastrous. Therefore, the aspirant on the spiritual path is required to undergo the practice of japa yoga or japa anushthana in a particular manner to discipline the psychic behaviour of the subconscious mind. If this is not observed, the mind will become unbalanced through premature awakening of the higher forces or kundalini.

Just as there are physical disciplines and drills by which the body is brought under control, exercised properly and purified, there are mental disciplines by which the thought processes can be checked. Similarly, japa yoga is performed to discipline the psychic body and the sadhaka can gain control over voluntary habits, nervous reflexes and tranquillity of mind.

What are the different types of japa sadhana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Japa in any form is accepted and advised. Writing the mantra as small as one can is *likhit japa*, the written japa. The more minute one writes the more engrossed and absorbed one will be; the bigger the letters the more distracted one will be. Likhit japa is one way of going into that deep state of meditative absorption.

The second method is the continuous repetition for 21,600 breaths while one is waking and sleeping. Normal people forget everything when they sleep, yet yogis remain awake even when they are sleeping. This is the statement in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:69) as well: yogis remain awake at night while bhogis sleep.

*Yaa nishaa sarvabhootaanaam tasyaam jaagarti samyamee;
Yasyaam jaagrati bhootaani saa nishaa pashyato muneh.*

That which is night to all beings, then the self-controlled man is awake; when all beings are awake, that is night for the sage who sees.

With the third method one selects a specific number of mantras to do within a certain period; that is known as anushtana – 10,000, 11,000, 15,000 mantras in so many days in so many malas. 100 malas a day, 80 malas a day and within that stipulated period fulfil the required number of mantra repetitions, 125,000.

The fourth method is the normal sadhana, constant practice: two malas, five malas, whatever is the specified number, regularly without break, without fail and without distraction.

How important is correct pronunciation of the mantra in anushtana?

Swami Satyananda: In order to achieve the desired effect with a particular mantra, regardless of its intended purpose, it is of utmost importance that the correct pronunciation, not only grammatically but also phonetically, be taught by an expert. It is stated that the advice of a guru must be sought at any rate and in any case. A mantra selected from a book is only for achieving its ends, whereas the *bija* or seed mantra which is recited together with the mantra is only effective when a guru charges it while giving it to the disciple.

In order for a mantra to be effective it must produce the intended sound waves through correct pronunciation. This produces the corresponding colours and in turn will create the intended geometrical forms and figures. This procedure should be intensified and accompanied by proper thought waves. Besides the correct pronunciation, the proper intonation, pitch, mental concentration and application of the creative mind or imagination is most essential. The practice of japa during anushtana is mostly mental or sometimes in whispers.

How important is maintaining awareness on the mantra during japa?

Swami Niranjanananda: When Sri Swami Satyananda gave me my mantra, he told me to practise one mala every day. The mantra was small, so I used to finish my japa in five minutes.

Some time later I said to him, “I am finishing my mantra japa in five minutes, can I increase the number of malas?” He said, “How much would you like to increase it?” I said, “Well, one mala takes me five minutes. I can easily increase it to five or six malas. At least half an hour of solid sitting would be good for me.” He said, “You are thinking of solid sitting of the body. Tell me, is your awareness solid in the repetition of the mantra?” I said, “No.” He said, “For how many beads of the mala are you aware that you are repeating the mantra?” I said, “Maybe five, ten or twenty. Whenever I remember, I again bring my mind back.” He said, “Then you have never completed a single mala in your life and now you want to increase it to five. First finish one mala, which means total awareness for 108 mantras.”

When Sri Swami Satyananda was performing sadhana in Rikhia he used to tell people, “Don’t come to see me or talk to me, because if you come then I have to stop my sadhana and my mantra repetition in order to talk to you. If I can remain aware of my mantra for twenty-four hours of the day, that will be an attainment. If you come for two minutes the chain is broken. If you come for an hour’s satsang, the chain is broken. So, don’t come!” If mantra awareness deepens, then one attains the highest spiritual realization. That is the training of the mind. Therefore, for ordinary people one mala is enough, increasing the attention span with that.

Why is it necessary to do a high number of japa repetitions?

Swami Sivananda: Generally as many lakhs of japa as there are syllables in the mantra are done. It is better to do more than this prescribed number if the actual fruit of the japa is to be acquired. The mind is generally impure and it requires much labour to purify it in order to make it fit to concentrate on the mantra and its deity. Generally many purascharanas are required to attain the ideal. One purascharana does not bring the desired object, as the human mind is ever distracted and filled with rajas and tamas.

What are the important aspects of anushtana?

Swami Satyananda: The important features of anushtana are: mantra repetition, meditation on the ishta, trataka and awareness of guru.

Mantra anushtana clears the passage of divine forces. In mantra anushtana, the various forms of japa: japa with trataka, japa with dharana, japa in pharynx, japa in navel, japa at trikuti, japa with meditation on the form of mantra, and japa with meditation on the mental vibration of the mantra, should be done in the above respective order. Retrogression will then stop altogether.

For long sittings, after finishing the above modes of japa, one can do talyukta japa, japa in kumbhaka, japa in bhramari, shruta japa, japa on the tampura (musical instrument), japa on a bell, japa in yoni mudra, japa on a drum or tambour, throughout the day and night without a mala.

One should practise all types of japa, one by one, and thus experiment on the techniques. Afterwards, one adopts one technique only, yet the duration of japa will remain the same.

What is the reason for repeating the mantra so many times?

Swami Satyananda: In the science of mantra, daily practice is important. The mantra that is given by the guru should be practised as much as possible. However, to awaken the potentiality and shakti of the mantra so that it becomes full of life, the mantra has to be practised a certain number of times.

Practising for five minutes or ten minutes offers relaxation, but it only intensifies the alpha waves. That is not the discovery of spiritual potential. One has to go beyond it. Beyond it there are no waves. Gamma, beta, alpha, theta and delta are the normal waves. The mind has to go beyond the waves, beyond the waveless and void, it has to become zero. The mind has to stop for a moment.

How important is faith and belief when practising japa?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one practises mantra japa with faith and belief the mind will turn away from raga. The seers have explained this by saying, *Mananat trayate iti mantrah* – “The mind is liberated through mantra.” The bondage of the mind is raga; therefore, through mantra the mind becomes free from its self-created bondage. As long as one does the mantra with faith, belief and feeling, it does not matter if one has never before done any practices.

Mantra is one of the biggest contributions of the Indian culture to the global culture. There is no other culture in the world that has talked about mantra, and people everywhere have accepted and imbibed it. When a child runs to his parents, he does not plan it. He just goes with simple innocence and faith. The love between a child and parent is simple and natural. If this feeling were not spontaneous and natural, they would not desire each other. This is how one should do mantra japa, with a spontaneous feeling, with faith and dedication, so that one can connect with the divine qualities and be free of the colouring of maya.

PRACTISING ANUSHTHANA

During japa anushthana, how should the time be allotted throughout the day?

Swami Satyananda: Along with the practice of japa, the study of books pertaining to spiritual topics, such as the Upanishads, should be undertaken. At least eight hours should be devoted to anushthana, eight hours to studying books and scriptures, and eight hours to rest.

In the ancient texts it is written that three hours of practice should be done at one stretch. In between, a short break can be taken to stretch the limbs and then the practice should be continued.

What is the purpose of anushthana and how much japa is appropriate?

Swami Satyananda: Anushthana denotes a methodical process by which the deity of the mantra is awakened and *mantra siddhi*, the knowledge or power of the mantra, is attained. Japa anushthana can be practised for two purposes. One is for self-purification, enlightenment and spiritual progress. The second purpose is for the attainment of a particular selfish aim, such as material gain, position or prestige.

Anushthana performed with *nishkama bhava*, selfless feeling or motive, is called *purascharana*, in which one undertakes to repeat as many lakhs of japa equal to the total number of syllables of the mantra. In the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya*, for example, there are five syllables (*Om* is not counted), so one would have to do five lakhs (500,000) and half a lakh (50,000) japa to complete one anushthana. The fifty thousand are offered to the guru. Complete *purascharana* of Gayatri is twenty-four lakhs, but in the case of long mantras, *khand*, or part, *purascharana* is prescribed; also in the case of the Mahamrityunjaya mantra. Five lakh will give peace and enlightenment to the mind, but the half lakh should be dedicated to the peace of others.

This is a complete cycle. If this cycle is completed, then *siddhi*, perfection, is attained. The mantra becomes awakened or alive. However, this is difficult so there are other provisions. The mantra can be practised 125,000 times or there are smaller cycles. These cycles are necessary in order to explode the power of the mantra.

The aspirant should resolve to do twenty thousand japa, or whatever he can every day. It has to be completed definitely at a particular time every day. One should not underdo or overdo it. There must be regularity and no fluctuation. *Purascharana* normally takes a month. It is better to take milk, fruits, boiled vegetables and a sattwic diet.

Those who want to perform anushthana with a particular aim should either do it or have it done under the strict rules of the scriptures. Some people may well ask whether it is

right and effective to have the japa done by pandits. One who does japa releases a certain force, which may either be in the form of thought vibrations or in the form of energy, either electronic or vibratory. It is however, a fact that energy is released from the person who practises japa.

Why is discrimination necessary for anushthana?

Swami Sivananda: Anushthanas can be practised for a day, a week, a fortnight, a month, forty-eight days, ninety-six days, three months, six months or one year. The duration of time depends upon the ability and liking of the performer. One can choose any kind of anushthana according to one's circumstances.

The rigour of the sadhana is dependent on the constitution and health of the individual. A sick person is not required to take a cold bath three times a day. An unhealthy person with a weak body is not required to observe a total fast. A person suffering from an acute disease is not required to forego taking medicine. Commonsense is the fundamental factor in all sadhana. No rule is an eternal rule. Rules change from place to place, time to time and from one condition to another condition.

A sadhaka from Madras in South India may wear only a loincloth even in the dead of winter, but a sadhaka living in the icy Gangotri cannot be expected to practise the same method, even in summer. The Himalayan climate is not like that of Trivandrum or Madras. Holding an umbrella when it is raining heavily is not against the practice of anushthana. Wearing shoes when walking over the glaciers of Kailash or Manasarovar is not detrimental to anushthana.

Anushthana is rigorous mental discipline, not mere physical mortification. Absolute necessities of the body are not hindrances. Abnormal cravings are against anushthana, not the normal requirements. Strict brahmacharya is an absolute necessity for all anushthana. Speaking the truth and not harming others are absolute necessities, for these are mental disciplines.

Any action done against the feeling of the mind is not conducive to the rigour of the anushthana. One who feels one thing and does another is a *mithyachari*, for whom the fruit of sadhana will not accrue. The mind is the author of all actions. The body is only an instrument. Suppressing the effect when the cause is vigorously working will not help annihilate the cause. The mind has to be calmed, and for that all sadhanas are done in one way or other.

Generally by anushthana the shastras mean only japa and swadhyaya. Meditation is not considered as an anushthana. It is a higher step where the word anushthana loses its meaning. Worship also can be considered as an anushthana, though it is not included in the orthodox conception. The rules for all anushthana constitute the central idea that the anushthatri should be exclusively occupied in the performance of anushthana to the total detachment from all family engagements or worldly activities. Even worldly thoughts should not enter the mind of the anushthatri. Anushthana is a great tapas or austerity and should be performed with great reverence, faith and care.

How should the sadhaka proceed?

Swami Sivananda: The japa sadhaka should start his anushthana in the early morning at brahmamuhurta on an auspicious day. He should bathe in a river or even in the water of a well if other water is not available. Mouna should be observed throughout, until the break of the day's anushthana. The major portion of the day should be used for japa. The sadhaka should offer prayers to the sun and the ishta devata of the mantra he is using in anushthana. He should offer his daily prayers and perform sandhya. Then he should sit in a clean place facing east or north with a mala in his hand. His mind should be concentrated on the deity of the mantra. The purpose of the anushthana should be borne in mind throughout. Complete mouna should be observed. The eyes should be shut. The senses should be withdrawn. There should be no other thought except that of the ideal.

The sadhaka should not approach his wife at any time until the whole of the anushtana is over for the prescribed period. There should be no thought of wife, children and property during the performance of the anushtana or even during the period of rest at night. These are all hindrances to attaining the object desired from the anushtana.

It is better to feed at least one person daily until the end of the anushtana. On the last day a havan should be performed with *ahutis*, offerings, equal to one-tenth of the total number of japa done. On the last day also feeding of the poor may be conducted for the satisfaction of one's self. Water libations may be given equal to the number done in havan or else, if found to be inconvenient, the number of japa may be increased by that number.

In a nutshell, japa anushtana is the performance of japa for a protracted period with concentration of mind and without any thought of the external world. This leads to the achievement of the object of desire.

What are the rules for women?

Swami Sivananda: A woman doing anushtana will have slight changes in the rules regarding performance. She should not start the anushtana during the time of her menses, nor should the menses occur in the middle of the anushtana. Generally it is better for women to take up anushtana only for a period of less than a month. They should not suckle their children during the time of anushtana. Women should observe brahmacharya during the performance of anushtana. They also should take a daily bath. All other rules are just like those for males.

Why do disciplines have to be applied not only to the body?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are disciplines for every anushtana, both physical and mental. Normally people follow only the physical disciplines and not the spiritual and mental disciplines – this food is to be eaten and not that, this

drink is to be taken and not that, this is forbidden and that is accepted, this is taboo and that is okay, and so on. People impose such rules on themselves, and the focus of these rules essentially relates to the external environment. However, the rules of anushthana say that whatever rules and disciplines one follows in relation to the body, the same rules should be applied to the mind; only then will the anushthana bear fruit.

It is said in the scriptures that when one takes a sankalpa and performs an anushthana, the mind should be free from anger, fear, worry or depressing thoughts. The mind should not be agitated, but remain serene and quiet, as the deeper results of the anushthana will be felt in the mind, the pranas and the spirit, not in the body. Is one able to control the body without coming to terms with the mind? People undertake vows and fasts. It is said that during an anushthana one should forsake cereals and live on fruit. This becomes an excuse to eat more of the permitted foods, with the excuse that it is not healthy to remain hungry.

Whenever there is a vow or *vrata*, an anushthana, then people pay more attention to the food. Nobody bothers about purification of the mind. The mind keeps on playing games throughout the day. The mind is manipulative and hypocritical, and remains so.

People ask, how to practise bhakti? How to intensify their feelings, *bhavana*? If one needs to intensify one's bhavana, one must become aware of that bhavana, not the anushthana. One can practise any anushthana, however, if the mind and feelings are not connected with the anushthana, it is of no use.

What are the restrictions during the practice of anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: Many religions forbid things that are considered sinful. For example, many religions consider sex between spouses sinful and improper during anushthana. Hinduism calls it *yajna samskara*. Many people eat meat

and drink alcohol; Hinduism is candidly specific in this matter. If one is doing Devi purascharana these things are not banned, but they will have to be given up during Vishnu purascharana; not because it is sinful but because every mantra has its own do's and don'ts. If the mantra is *Om Namah Shivaya* there are no restrictions, a person can be non-vegetarian and drink alcohol also. This is for a long-term purascharana. However, if a short purascharana is undertaken, lasting two weeks or so, restrictions have to be observed whether the deity of the mantra is the Goddess, Shiva or Vishnu. Sex, liquor and non-vegetarian diet are forbidden, not because these things are bad but for the sake of self-control, especially when it is only for a fortnight.

For long-term purascharana, there are no restrictions for a Devi mantra, but for Vishnu, Rama, Hanuman mantras, liquor, meat, fish, and so on are not allowed. It is said that meat should not be eaten if a tulsi mala is used, but there are no restrictions for a rudraksha mala. This is so because over a long period such as two, three or four years, it is difficult for a person to observe restrictions and have self-control, so certain concessions are allowed. If a person wants freedom, he feels that many of those things are unnecessary and he wants to be free of them. This is a good conclusion.

In tantra shastra, wearing a particular mala during anushthana is prescribed, otherwise the anushthana cannot be performed. Japa yoga, which is a part of bhakti yoga, is not done in this way, so it is not necessary to wear the mala.

When should householders practise anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: In grihastha ashrama, a householder does not have enough leisure to do sadhana, whether he is a businessman, a farmer or a banker. Everybody is so busy with their daily routine that they have no time for spiritual development. Whatever sadhana they do is by way of obeying certain rules; some do five rounds of mala japa, some do three and thus fulfil their daily commitment of japa rounds. This is not actual sadhana, it is just a method to keep in

touch so that the threads are picked up easily when the time for sadhana comes.

Once a year, maybe for nine days or seven hours or three hours or one thousand times or ten thousand times, whatever a person decides to do, he does from morning until night. Light food is taken and the mind and body are purified and spiritually oriented. A particular mantra is chanted, repeated – this is anushthana.

In grihastha ashram it is essential to have a mantra siddhi for nishkama or sakama sankalpa. A mantra is a combination of letters and unification of power. On the basis of this mantra consciousness can be awakened, and when consciousness awakens, it awakens the mantra. Until consciousness is awakened, mantra will not be awakened.

In deciding the time and season in which to do an anushthana, the rule is neither too hot nor too cold. The most favourable time in India is from 15th July to 15th September.

When and for how long should anushthana be performed?

Swami Sivananda: There is no time limit for anushthana. It all depends upon individual liking. Doing it even for a single day has its own effect, but it is better to practise for long periods, since the mind is well disciplined in such practices. The longer the anushthana, the greater the power obtained. He becomes like a yogi, possessed of health, wealth, prosperity, knowledge and power. Whatever he wishes he gets.

Anushthana can be performed even at night time. The practice at night is more powerful and brings quicker results than the anushthana done during daytime. The mind is calm and is free from the world at night, so all practices at night have a greater force or samskara.

During holidays, the aspirant can plunge into anushthana either at home or in a holy place, preferably at Rishikesh or Prayag on the banks of the Ganga or the Yamuna. Doing some lakhs or crores of japa vigorously, living

on milk and fruits and observing mouna, he will realize wonderful results, tremendous purity of heart and actual darshan of God. Intense sadhana in solitude is necessary to reap good spiritual harvest.

When inspired to perform anushthana, should one ask the guru for the mantra?

Swami Satyananda: When japa anushthana is performed for spiritual purposes, it is a part of bhakti yoga. When japa anushthana is performed for the fulfilment of a selfish motive or attainment of *siddhis*, psychic powers, it is a part of tantra shastra.

In the first case the aspirant can select his own mantra and the type of anushthana, or he might receive the mantra in a dream or in meditation. It is advisable, however, to seek the help of a guru. The guru is aware of the psychic personality, of certain defects and inclinations in the sadhaka to react too intensely or with unbalanced emotion. Devi is the symbol for the higher aspects of the unconscious and the Durga mantra is a powerful mantra, which releases great forces when repeated. It would definitely have an adverse effect on a sadhaka with uncontrolled emotions and unbalanced mental faculties, by arousing these powerful forces before he is able to control the emotions and mind.

The effect of the Rama mantra is soothing and calming on the mind. The Shiva mantra will usually develop a sense of detachment, ecstasy and absolute indifference. In Hindi, an aspirant with these attributes is called a *masta*, 'one who is carefree or even absolutely blissful'.

Should the ishta mantra be discontinued during anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: During the performance of anushthana, the regular practice of ishta mantra should be interrupted and taken up again as soon as the anushthana is completed.

The ishta mantra creates figures in the subconscious mind. The other mantra which is temporarily adopted

is meant to achieve a particular end. At the end of the anushtana, one releases it, clears the mind and again starts one's ishta mantra.

What sadhana would you recommend for a dedicated householder bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Here is a sadhana for advanced students. This is highly useful for getting quick, solid progress on the spiritual path.

Practice for one day: Get up at 4 am. Start your japa sitting in any asana you have mastered. Do not take any food or drink for fourteen hours. Do not get up from the position. Finish the japa at sunset. Take milk and fruits after sunset. Practise this once a week or once a fortnight. Householders can do it during holidays.

Practice for ten days: Get up at 4 am. Start japa of the mantra of your ishta devata or your guru mantra and finish it at sunset. Then take some milk and fruits or *kheer* (milk and rice boiled with sugar). Take rest for one or two hours, but continue the japa. Then again start the japa with deep concentration. Retire to bed at eleven in the night. You can combine meditation along with japa. Make all arrangements for bath, food, etc. inside the room. Have two rooms if you can manage, one for bath and one for meditation. This practice can be kept up even for forty days. You will have wonderful results and various experiences.

Anushtana for forty days: Get up at 4 am. Practise japa of Rama mantra at the rate of 3,000 daily. During the last five days practise 4,000 daily. Write down on a thin sheet of paper 'Rama, Rama' 300 times. Cut it into small pieces. Each piece will contain one Ram Naam. Then roll it with a small ball of atta (wheat flour paste). The practice of writing will take two or three hours according to your capacity. Cut the pieces one by one. You will have to perform the whole process sitting on one asana. If you find this difficult you can change your position, but you should not leave your seat. Some use a special ink made of saffron, musk, camphor, etc.

and a special writing pen made of a sharp-pointed, thin, tulasi stick. You can use ordinary ink and pen if you cannot get these. Throw the balls in the Ganga or any river for the fish. You will develop wonderful patience. You will receive divine grace.

Ramayana path: Study the whole of the *Ramayana* 108 times with purity and concentration. This can be done within three years if you can devote three hours daily. You can go through the book three times in a month. You will have a vision of Sri Rama.

What is the purpose of mantra?

Swami Satyananda: All mantras are important, however, one's personal mantra should not be changed. In the beginning, the mantra brings out the negative qualities, but finally it purifies the heart and mind.



3

Ishta Devata

It is easy to merge the mind on one whom one loves. Whoever that beloved person is, if one can merge the mind one will develop a divine or cosmic mind.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

A SYMBOL OF ONE'S CHOICE

What does ishta devata mean?

Swami Satyananda: The psychic symbol is called ishta devata. In Sanskrit the word *ishta* means 'desired by choice' and *devata* means 'form of divine awareness'. Thus the two words together mean 'the chosen form of higher or divine awareness'.

Etymologically, *devata* means 'that which radiates, illumines, enlightens, sheds light on, dispels darkness'. The devata is the one who lights up the darkness and reveals the hidden essence. There are as many devatas as there are people. Some worship Vishnu, some Shiva or Mahadeva, some Ganesha or Hanuman as their ishta devata. One may not see one's ishta devata or have any logical proof of its existence but still worship the chosen deity regularly.

How does one choose one's ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: Knowledge about the ishta is spontaneous and easy; it happens by itself. Mirabai did not have to look

for her ishta. When she was a little girl, a sadhu came to visit her father and stayed in the palace. He had a statue of Sri Krishna with him that Mirabai spontaneously accepted. She never felt anything other than acceptance. *Mero to Giridhara Gopala doosaro na koi* – “To me, only Krishna is dear, and no one else.” Why did she not go towards Sri Rama or Shiva?

The one who is desired is one’s ishta. One should know what one wishes for. How would anyone else know? If one wants many things, if one wants Rama, and also Krishna and Devi, it is difficult to fix the ishta.

What is the best way to connect with one’s ishta?

Swami Sivananda: Constantly remembering the Lord throughout life is the easiest way of attaining Him. That devotee will not think of any other object, save his ishta devata. The Lord cannot be attained by one who remembers Him by fits and starts, or who remembers Him for six months and then leaves the practice and then again remembers Him for six months. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (8:14):

*Ananyachetaah satatam yo maam smarati nityashah;
Tasyaaham sulabhah paartha nityayuktasya yoginah.*

I am easily attainable by that ever-steadfast yogi who constantly and daily remembers Me (for a long time), not thinking of anything else with a single mind (one-pointed mind), O Partha.

What is the difference between a psychic symbol used in meditation and an ishta devata?

Swami Niranjanananda: Mantras are a set of sounds which correspond to the practitioner’s vibrations and which awaken the psychic centres or *chakras* by influencing them on the vibratory level. Each mantra, according to its vibration, creates a psychic symbol. The combination of sounds will make one gradually aware of the symbol which is the visual aspect of the mantra. If one does not have a psychic symbol, it will manifest spontaneously as one evolves in the mantra

meditation. The image becomes so strong and powerful that it superimposes itself on top of every other visual image that one may think of or create during meditation. It has been the experience of many people that, while repeating and concentrating on the mantra, they have suddenly seen a technicoloured triangle manifesting before them. After that, they adopt the triangle as their psychic symbol or visual image of their mantra.

The ishta devata can mean different things to different people. Indians have always seen and experienced divinity in two ways. One is in the manifest form which is known as *sakara*, having a form, the other is unmanifest or *nirakara*, without form. The whole gamut of three hundred and thirty million gods and goddesses is nothing but ishta devatas. A Shaivite or a Vaishnavite always says that Shiva, Sri Rama or Sri Krishna is his ishta devata. That is the image he worships. It is the concept of a manifest form of divinity representing a quality to which he is attracted. A person who has faith in Sri Rama will be happy with the image of Sri Rama. The sensitivity or nature of that individual personality and mind are thus linked with the quality which is represented by the image. There is a rapport. The same thing applies to any of the gods or goddesses.

The meaning of ishta devata is not god. It means 'effulgence, illumination or light'. Deva is the root – the raw power which is experienced in the form of a zero, twenty-five, forty or one thousand watt bulb is the devata; and when the word ishta is added it means 'a quality which illuminates, an attribute of divinity which brings enlightenment according to one's nature and belief'.

To those who are not attuned to this concept, devata will not have a physical image but will convey an idea of an attribute or quality which is superhuman. For many people it becomes an abstract idea. The mantra *Om Kleem* has the psychic symbol of a red inverted triangle and its ishta devata is the force or *shakti* of time. Many people cannot work with a mere concept of time, but if they are given the ishta

devata of Kali, they can immediately relate to that image. Kali is the shakti of eternal time, time which consumes everything.

What are mandalas and ishta devatas?

Swami Niranjanananda: In a mandala, a correlation is established between the atomic universe and the greater universe, the microcosmic and macrocosmic realities. Mandalas represent a link between the individual living in the material life, experiencing happiness, pleasure, pain and suffering, nature and environment, the earth, the universe and the higher reality. This higher, transcendental reality is symbolized in the form of a *devata*, male deity, or *devi*, female deity. Gods and goddesses such as Rama, Krishna, Durga or Devi are mandalas. They are pictorial concepts and represent the idea of completeness. Mandalas contain many symbols that signify the individual, the world, and the individual's connection with the world and the divine. Each individual has a unique connection with a personal deity, which links them to the higher reality.

Does the ishta devata of bhaktas become their background thought?

Swami Sivananda: The background thought of a businessman is money. He plans, speculates and schemes about how to increase his money in the bank from one lakh to two lakhs. The background thought of a young man is his wife. The background thought of a doctor is his patients, dispensary and drugs. The background thought of a lawyer is his clients, courts and rulings of the High Court. The background thought of an old grandmother is her grandchildren. The vast majority of people indulge in thoughts of jealousy and hatred, and these thoughts form their background.

A Vedantin or a student of jnana yoga has an abstract background. He meditates on abstract ideas. The background thought of a bhakta is his ishta devata. A devotee of Sri Krishna always thinks of Krishna holding a flute. He has

a concrete background. A sattwic background keeps the mind always pure and takes the devotee to the goal. The mental image of Sri Krishna destroys other worldly thoughts. A sacred background of thought either concrete or abstract is a valuable spiritual asset.

A habit of thinking of the image is formed by constant thinking of one's ishta devata. Even in the office, when pen is put down on the desk, the mind through force of habit will at once move to the background thought and think of the picture of Sri Krishna. Even in dreams one will have vision of Sri Krishna only. The greater the sadhana, the stronger the background thought of the mental image. Even in the office, one can just close the eyes for a couple of minutes every hour, think of the picture of Sri Krishna and repeat his mantra. This is an excellent practice and solid sadhana. One will always have an unruffled state of mind and turn out more work with greater concentration.

In what way is one's symbol different from one's ishta devata?

Swami Niranjanananda: The guru is initially the symbol. Later, when total identification with the image or with the quality that the guru represents takes place, when the mind merges with the guru image, he becomes one's ishta devata.

With the ishta devata, there has to be a merger of the individual mind with what is being seen, with the quality that is being experienced. However, with the symbol this merger is not important. In meditation, one can be a passive observer of the symbol which becomes a tool for increasing the depth and objectivity of meditation.

In the case of the ishta devata there is a connection with one's emotions and aspirations. If one has the guru as ishta, the emotion felt for the guru is involved and one's aspirations manifest in the image of the guru. There is total personality involvement in the ishta devata which is not the case with the symbol.

How should one relate to one's mantra and ishta?

Swami Satyananda: Saints from the vedic rishis to Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, right down to the present day, have been stressing the same note: bhakti yoga. The object of concentration should be related to the aspirant through the heart, not through the intellect. The mantra and the deity, which are the basis for consolidation of dissipated energy, should be a matter of heart more than head.

Is it necessary to choose an ishta devata even if there is no strong attraction to one form?

Swami Niranjanananda: One may be a sannyasin, a sadhaka, a born-again Christian or a Buddhist, it does not matter, but there has to be a clear understanding of what one's psychic manifestations are concerning the ishta devata. If one is attracted to more than one form, the best thing is to become a nirakara, where one can keep on including the traits and qualities of all forms in one.

How can a bhakta develop the constant presence of the ishta's image in the mind?

Swami Sivananda: In the beginning it may not be possible to bring the full image before the mind's eye. When thinking of the face of Sri Krishna, the feet and hands will disappear. When thinking of His feet, His face will slip away. Through constant sadhana a well-defined, clear-cut, full image can be visualized. A ray of the mind goes forth to the object, which in turn shapes and moulds the mental substance into the form of the object. When a person thinks of an image of Sri Krishna or Sri Rama constantly with single-minded or one-pointed concentration like an unbroken flow of oil, his mental substance takes the form of the image. The image leaves a definite 'impression on the mind', called *samskara*. If this impression is repeated often, a tendency or habit is formed in the mind. That is the reason why the aspirant is asked to repeat the mantra several lakhs of times. A man can shape his mind for good or bad. It depends upon the

nature of food he gives to the mind. Every thought produces a definite change in the substance of the brain also.

One has to create a sattvic background of thought through continued struggle. The mind will run back in its old ruts and manufacture images of worldly objects. The sadhaka will have to bring the mind back again and again to the sattvic background of thought that he has developed. The struggle will be keen in the beginning. Later on the mind will quietly rest in the spiritual background of thought.

Why is it important to personalize the object of one's devotion?

Swami Satyananda: Individual awareness is formless, whether my awareness or anyone's awareness. It is there, it can be felt – 'I am'. However, that awareness cannot be seen, and therefore it is difficult to retain mentally, to concentrate upon for a period of time. It is abstract awareness – 'I am'. Therefore, that awareness has to be given some form for the time being. For that purpose one should adopt a form which one can retain in one's mind, the form of the guru or the form of anyone, so that one is always thinking about him or her.

When the mind merges with anything, sacred or otherwise, when it becomes one with anything, awful or beautiful, when it unites with anything, divine or otherwise, one's ishta devata is there. The external factor of the form means something but it is immaterial. One's awareness is abstract, formless, nameless, beyond time and space. Now it has become more concrete in the form of a Shivalingam or in the form of this or that – in my form. The form is immaterial yet it has a place in the mind; without that, the cognition, the perception or awareness of one's awareness cannot take place.

What is the nature of one's relationship with the ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: Ishta devata is the form of God towards which intense attraction is felt. The word ishta means 'I like

it' and devata means 'divine form', so ishta devata means that divine form which one likes – Christ, Sri Krishna, Sri Rama. Some people like Sri Krishna because he was a mischievous chap, always playing and creating trouble for his mother and the community. Sri Rama, on the other hand, was cultured and some people like that aspect. For others, the ishta devata can be the form of Kali, Durga, Devi or Mary. Any aspect that one likes may be chosen, but the form has to be there. Even the cross is a form of God, not because Christ was crucified on it, but because it represents the inner, psychic body: ajna chakra, ida, pingala and sushumna. The cross is a good form to meditate on. Concentrating on the cross does not make one a Christian; it makes one a sadhaka and helps one's sadhana.

Swami Sivananda was such a disciplined person yet his ishta devata was Sri Krishna, the playboy, who represents joy, mirth and *ananda*, bliss. I have always been a free person and yet my ishta devata is Sri Rama, who symbolizes discipline, principles and dharma.

Do ishta devata and guru mantra go together?

Swami Satyananda: Each and every person has an ishta devata, or chosen deity. That ishta devata has to be decided for oneself. A form of the deity has to be chosen as one's ishta devata. The ishta devata has a specific mantra called the ishta mantra. That ishta mantra must be obtained from the guru, and then it becomes the guru mantra. The whole structure has to be built on these two pillars of ishta devata and guru mantra.

There could be one mantra and another deity. If the mantra is *Om Namah Shivaya*, it is not necessary for the Shivalingam to be the deity; it could also be Sri Rama. If the mantra is *Sri Ram Jaya Jaya Ram*, the ishta can be Sri Rama or Sri Krishna, or even a goddess, whoever one chooses or wants. The guru can also be the ishta.

Does the ishta devata vary according to the personality of the individual?

Swami Satyananda: Some love Sri Krishna, others like Sri Rama, still others are drawn to Shiva. I personally like Sri Rama very much because his personality is absolute – disciplined, systematic and perfect. He did not make much of a fuss and noise in life, but finished his job quietly. Other people are attracted to Sri Krishna as the ideal form and embodiment of joy, dynamism, love and music. Sri Krishna embodies all the beautiful things. For other people, the form of Shiva, whose detachment is so perfect that he does not care, no matter who comes and goes, is the form of greatest attraction.

The form of the supreme varies according to the inclination and personality of the devotee. For some it is Christ, for some Sri Krishna, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Shiva, Sri Rama. These forms become the object of awareness, and through these forms the devotee moves further forward, evolves through difficulties and problems, until a day comes when he is out of it. This is the vedic tradition.

In the vedic tradition, each person starts from his own town to reach the destination, not from somebody else's town. Ultimately all converge in the centre, no matter which way they go. It is not necessarily only Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Govinda, Devi, Christ or Mohammed who will take one there. Whichever way one goes will take one there. That is experience, and after experience one is fulfilled.

Does one encounter any difficulty choosing the guru as ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: The guru lives in the body and has the limitations of the body. The basic needs of the body, hunger, thirst, sleep, have to be satisfied. The guru may not perform these kriyas like an average person; however, he is not totally free from this bond. He inhabits the body and has to bear with the needs of the body. The body which has birth has to

have death also and, similarly, the human foibles like desire, anger, ego, pride and conceit influence even the guru, though not to the same extent as an average person. If the guru is completely free from all of them, the question does not arise. If one has complete faith in the guru and sees him sleeping during the day, the faith is shattered. One becomes disillusioned to see the guru drinking tea when he has been accepted as one's God.

Before beginning to worship the guru in meditation, one's devotion and faith should be absolute, so unless a close relationship of love has been established with the guru, one should not have him as the God or ishta. It may be that the guru will never let one down, but something trivial might jolt or shatter one's faith. Therefore, the guru should be accepted as guru only, when an indivisible connection of love emerges and a deep-seated relationship builds up between the disciple and the guru. Then having him as the deity in meditation will be highly beneficial. Until there is true rapport with the guru, he cannot be the guide. The ishta, for one who has a visible body, is more beneficial. This could be any form of God. There can be one mantra but a different deity. The faith in the ishta should never shatter and the mind should become one with it.

What does one do if the mantra given does not correspond to one's ishta devata?

Swami Niranjanananda: Some people might have received a mantra which does not correspond to their ishta devata. Sri Swami Satyananda's problem was that his ishta devata was Sri Rama, and Swami Sivananda gave him the Shiva mantra. He used to have great difficulty doing the Shiva mantra and having Sri Rama as the ishta devata. The same happened to me, for I was a great lover of Narayana and my mantra was a Shiva mantra. In a child it does not matter as the intellect is not there. However, in people whose intellect is awakened there is a problem. They associate the mantra with their belief system knowing fully well that the real spirit is formless.

What can an aspirant do if there is attraction to two ishta devatas?

Swami Satyananda: In childhood I chose Sri Rama as my ideal, but when I was initiated into sannyasa I got caught in the Shaiva tradition. It was like a man loving two women at the same time. Whom to marry? My guru told me to marry both. I wondered how and he suggested I make Sri Rama my ishta devata and Shiva my ishta mantra. Since then I have been chanting *Om Namah Shivaya* and meditating on Sri Rama. People think God may be displeased with this, but He never is annoyed. When Shiva saw me chanting his name and meditating on Sri Rama, he said, “Very good.” When Sri Rama came to know that I meditate on him but chant Shiva’s mantra, he said, “Fine, fine.” There was perfect understanding between them. This is no loss to me, but a profit.

I decided I had been chanting this mantra for a long time without knowing who Shiva is or what he looks like. Is he Somnath, Pashupatinath, Baidyanath, Vishwanath, or Mrityunjaya – the Lord of Tryambakeshwar? I thought, let me have an interview with Shiva. I must have *sakshatkara*, his mystic vision. I was trying to discover how this could happen when this method came to my mind.

Both Shiva and Sri Rama are mutual friends, devotees, bhaktas and disciples. They admire and love each other and surrender to each other. Sri Rama thinks of Shiva continuously and Shiva meditates on Sri Rama. Shiva does japa of Sri Rama’s name and Sri Rama chants the name of Shiva. Shiva follows Sri Rama everywhere; he also attended Sri Rama’s wedding. Shiva was present when Sri Rama was playing in the courtyard of King Dasharatha and even when Sri Rama was born. This is told in the story of Kakabhushundi. Shiva was present for Sri Rama’s coronation ceremony as well.

I believed in Sri Rama because I was born into the same clan as Sri Rama. I was born into the Ikshvaku clan, and Sri Rama was worshipped in our home. Shiva was

also worshipped, and in Kumaon it is common practice to worship Devi. In Almora, Garhwal and Nainital all the people are worshippers of Devi. All of Uttarakhand worships Devi and it is said that She took birth there as an avatara. As I was born into a kshatriya family of the Ikshvaku clan, I naturally liked the bow-bearing Sri Rama. Since childhood he has captivated me. He always carried a bow and arrow and was a symbol of courage and bravery. To all he was the model of beauty and decorum, an example of appropriate behaviour. However, I came into Shiva's community. I liked Shiva too and then I came to understand that they are admirers of each other. Shiva praises Rama and Rama prays to Shiva. No problem!

Should the ishta devata always remain the same or can a person worship a number of deities?

Swami Satyananda: All ishta devatas are from the same source. The One who is Sri Rama, is also Sri Krishna, Narayana, Devi. They are all based on one primary *tattva*, one element. The personal ishta mantra should be repeated morning and evening for a fixed time, one hour or two hours, but this does not stop one from worshipping Shiva, Hanuman or Ganesha.

How does the ishta devata relate to one's consciousness?

Swami Satyananda: The symbol and the form of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Christ, Saint Francis, or anybody, is a form on which one meditates and which shines within one's mind. It is not an object; it is not flesh and blood. It is made up of particles of light. It contains the elements of inner consciousness, and that is why they are known as ishta devata.

The ishta devata can be anyone: the guru's form, the form of one's mother, the form of the family deity, the form of a saint or saviour, the form of a rishi, or the form of a tribal God about whom one may have heard or seen.

When an aspirant has an ishta devata does he also need to have a guru?

Swami Satyananda: Ishta devata is an important factor in spiritual practice. It has to be realized within. However, the guru is more important because it is through the guru that inner awareness of the ishta devata becomes effulgent. In the final analysis, guru and ishta devata are one and the same. In the beginning, the guru is the inner awakener and the ishta devata is the form which shines in the depth of meditation. If someone is meditating on his ishta deva, but his guru doesn't come as the focus of awareness, what difference does it make? After all, externally ishta deva and guru are only two names, but internally they are one. Therefore, one must have both.

How does Sri Krishna explain the role of ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: There are scriptures written to suit various temperaments. Out of these I found the *Bhagavad Gita* to be the most practical book, as this book immediately symbolizes the entire life of a person. Renunciation of life and abandoning the desires is not the total symbol of life. The problem of that man who is tossed by desires and passions, but at the same time wants to have some higher experiences, has to be solved.

In Chapter 11 Arjuna says to Sri Krishna, "I want to experience the cosmic consciousness." Krishna says, "What are you talking about?" Arjuna says, "Yes, I want cosmic consciousness." Krishna says, "With these eyes?" He says, "I don't know with these eyes or with other eyes." Krishna says, "Arjuna, cosmic consciousness is an experience which one can't handle. You want it, I know, and everybody wants it, but once you have it you will not be able to handle it."

Arjuna was insistent, "I want it." Sri Krishna says, "All right, I now confer the third eye on you so that you see the cosmic form." Suddenly, the curtain was drawn and Arjuna began to see horrible things: dazzling brightness of thousands and thousands of suns together; rivers flowing and oceans passing into high waves; he began to see angels,

gods, demons, beautiful, ugly and hideous faces; he began to experience everything in this cosmic world. He held the hand of Krishna and said, "No, I don't want it. Please drop the curtain. It's too much. It is frightening, I am losing myself, and I may go crazy. I want to see the cosmic form in human form, for I understand it and I can handle it. It is not very bright, it is not very beautiful, it is not very ugly, it is not very weighty, and it is not very attractive."

Then Krishna dropped the curtain and told him, "Everybody wants the cosmic experience, but nobody understands that cosmic experience needs a cosmic mind to experience it. You have always been an individual, identifying yourself with the mundane things. You have read about the cosmic experience, and that is why you want it."

The human form is pleasant, it may be the form of your guru, of father, mother, brother, sister and friend. It may be the form of anyone one worships, likes and loves. It is easy to merge the mind on one whom one loves. Whoever that beloved person is, if one can merge the mind one will develop a divine or cosmic mind. With that cosmic mind one can have the cosmic experience within, where one can see the whole universe in the total space of time. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that one should worship, concentrate and meditate on a figure or person whom one can handle.

A TOOL OF COMMUNION

How does God reveal Himself to his devotee?

Swami Satyananda: God reveals Himself to His devotees in a variety of ways. He assumes the form which the devotee has chosen for His worship. If he worships Him as Hari with four hands, He will come to him as Hari. If he adores Him as Shiva, He will give him darshan as Shiva. If he worships Him as Mother Durga or Kali, He will come to him as Durga or Kali. If he worships Him as Sri Rama, Sri Krishna or Dattatreya, He will come to him as Sri Rama, Sri Krishna or

Dattatreya. If he worships Him as Christ or Allah, He will come to him as Christ or Allah.

How can one's ishta be realized?

Swami Satyananda: The form of God is charming, the look of God is lovely, the touch of God is delightful, the speech of God is magnetic, the contact of God is purifying. The sentiments of God are filled with love. The grace of God is motiveless. God's apparel is divine, His gait graceful, His love inexhaustible, His nose attractive. Each limb of God is temptingly beautiful. The bhakta must have love and attraction for every movement of his God, so much so that he will forget himself. This is the way of realizing the ishta.

How does one choose an ishta devata?

Swami Sivananda: The ishta devata – Shiva, Sri Krishna, Sri Rama, Vishnu, Dattatreya, Gayatri, Durga, Kali – can be chosen according to inclination or in consultation with a good astrologer who will select the deity according to the zodiac sign. Everyone has worshipped a devata in previous births. The samskaras are in the subconscious mind, so naturally everyone has an inclination towards a particular devata. If Sri Krishna was worshipped in a previous birth, naturally there will be an inclination to Sri Krishna in this birth also.

When one is in great agony and distress one will naturally utter a certain name of God. This will provide the clue to finding one's ishta devata. When stung by a scorpion one person may utter "Rama," another "Krishna," while a third may utter "Narayana" and a fourth may utter "Shiva." Calling a particular name is due to the samskara of a previous birth. If Sri Rama was worshipped in the previous birth, naturally one will utter "Rama" when stung by a scorpion.

What should be the relationship between the ishta devata and awareness?

Swami Satyananda: One of the most important principles of tantra is the deity. The tantrics call it ishta devata, which

means the divinity of one's choice. If Kali is the divinity of choice, then she is one's ishta devata. One of the basic principles in tantra is that the deity, ishta devata and the devotee are not different. It means that particular statue or that particular ishta devata or that particular form to which one is offering pooja is oneself. If Kali is worshipped, one has to feel one is Kali or that Kali is oneself and sometimes this creates confusion. She or he is one's objectified spirituality, and therefore the tenet of tantra is:

Devo bhutwa devam yajet.

If one has to worship a deity one will have to become that.

Is the ishta devata a reflection of the individual's inner consciousness?

Swami Satyananda: Many people who are born Christians like Kali when they see her. Kali is black, not fair and not beautiful, but they like her. They are projecting their own consciousness, which is identified with Kali. There is an identification between the mandala and the sadhaka. This is the secret. It is called ishta devata.

The guru never tells the disciple whom he should worship. The guru mantra is ordained by guru, but no one ever says guru devata; it is ishta devata. Ishta means choice. The devata has to be of one's choice. The *vigraha*, identification of oneself with the grasped object, mandala or devata is the reflection of inner consciousness. Ganesha represents one person's inner consciousness, Shiva another person's inner consciousness and Rama represents someone else's inner consciousness. Therefore these deities appear to be different, but they are different because of the projection of one's individual consciousness.

What is the purpose of the ishta devata?

Swami Sivananda: While doing japa of any mantra, the devotee should think that the ishta devata is being prayed to, that the ishta devata is really listening, looking with merciful

eyes and with open hands He is giving one freedom from fear with a view to giving liberation, *moksha*. If the image of the ishta devata cannot be formed and the mind fixed on it, then the sound of the mantra should be heard while mentally repeating it, or the letters of the mantra visualized. This will stop the mind from wandering.

This can also happen through realizing a particular form in a vision or in a dream. Sometimes when dreaming one sees a beautiful figure and it is impressive and one can always concentrate on that. These mandalas are one-dimensional, two- and three-dimensional. A murti has three dimensions, a photo has two dimensions. Three dimensions are definitely more impressive because the mind can adjust itself easily to three dimensions, as the mind also has three dimensions. Therefore, the three-dimensional mind can fix itself on the three-dimensional ishta devata, and that is the secret to why murtis are worshipped.

God has no form. God is nirakara, not sakara. Whatever it is, whether it is called God or Allah, Sri Rama or Shyam, it is *nirakara*, formless. The ultimate reality, the truth, or whatever is beyond this world, has no form and no place. It is nirakara.

Ordinary human beings have impure minds and cannot concentrate on one thought for a period of time, so how can the formless even be conceived, contemplated or thought about. Therefore, the concept of ishta devata in the form of a three-dimensional murti is for the purpose of purification and improving the quality of the mind.

How does one unite with the ishta devata in daily life?

Swami Satyananda: Unite the mind with the ishta devata. Lean the mind towards the ishta, just as when cooking for loved ones, one is always aware of them – children and husband. It is not the act which is important, it is the awareness of the person for whom it is being done.

In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the sadhana of the Gopis has been described:

Those Gopis are blessed who have surrendered their hearts to Lord Krishna. While performing their domestic work, like milking the cows, threshing paddy, churning curd, sweeping, smearing the floors with cow dung, quietening their weeping children, singing lullabies and cleaning clothes, they sing the praise of Lord Krishna, their hearts filled with His love, eyes filled with tears and throats choked with feelings.

How does the power of one's ishta manifest?

Swami Satyananda: The best sadhana is bhakti or love, in which at every moment the mind is fixed in His remembrance. This is yoga because both become a part of each other. When the mind is not wholly engrossed in one's God it is known as viyoga. Love should be of such intensity that one does not forget Him for even a moment; day and night, one eats, drinks, sits, bathes, talks, slaps and even fights with Him. The practice of this feeling leads to samadhi. There is no thought of the world and the mind of the devotee rises above this illusion.

If the devotee's sadhana of love reaches this level, he does not need asana, pranayama, meditation, or anything else. When there is so much love, the mind becomes immersed spontaneously. If the devotee intensifies this sadhana of love to such an extent that he feels more and more uneasy, he gets tears in his eyes; with the utterance of His name an electric current shoots through his body; nothing pleases him; and without any effort His name is constantly and spontaneously repeated to the extent that he is not aware whether he is taking His name or not.

When love increases then longing and remembrance also increase. One loses touch with the world. The devotee cries night and day in the pain of separation. He sees his God within himself as well as in everything outside. Receiving the power of this love, he gets darshan, he attains samadhi, he can see the past, present and future, he gets everything. This is called the Radha bhava.

While remembering his ishta, the devotee may experience hiccups, shivering, excitement, tears, unconsciousness, sweat or heat. This is because the ishta has to be worshipped in every form. Especially as He is the nearest and dearest, the love of all loves, one must sing His praise and beautify oneself for Him. Sometimes in His remembrance one has dreams or feels His touch or blessings.

How should one meditate on the ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: Keep in view a few important points for meditation on the ishta devata. Try to think of the particular deity through general observances. Think of the whole picture of the ishta devata, the place where it is kept and the surroundings. Have a vivid imagination of this from general to particular. Thereafter the same practice may be repeated according to convenience.

How can one strengthen one's connection with the ishta devata?

Swami Niranjanananda: The only way to strengthen the connection with the ishta devata is through meditation, through belief and through faith. These are the only methods. Belief or conviction; faith or feeling and meditation; the process of identification with ishta devata. Any one of the three methods will lead to success.

Why should the ishta devata be only one and not many?

Swami Niranjanananda: When one is in front of one's guru or ishta, one should restrain one's ego and surrender it to him. Only then can one awaken true *shraddha* or faith, bhakti and surrender, which then connects one with God. Otherwise, bhakti becomes *vyabhicharini*, prostitute-like. A bee sits on a flower for only a moment, draws some nectar from it and then goes on to the next flower, and the next, and the next. It does not suck the nectar from one flower only, it goes on collecting it from many flowers. If the bee collected the honey from one flower it would not have to wander so much. Likewise,

when a person worships various deities or people and keeps on wandering around without focusing his faith on one ishta, then that bhakti is called vyabhicharini. Only by concentrating one's faith on one ishta, is there a possibility of attainment.

It is simple. If one needs to dig for water then one should dig one hole fifty feet deep, and not fifty holes one foot deep. In the first case one will definitely find water, in the latter case it will be failed labour.

How does darshan of one's ishta lead to transformation of consciousness?

Swami Satyananda: The sadhaka should realize that his meditational object is not merely a photograph, but a platform for the descent of the Divine. He should understand throughout everything that the more he concentrates on the picture, the clearer his ishta will become. Let it become a truth of his mind that his ishta is everywhere, even though he is encased in a body for the favour of his bhaktas. The first and last truth is that he should constantly be aware of the fact that there is every truth in the following saying:

He will appear before you in flesh and blood, reveal unto you jnana, and converse with you.

When all vrittis pertaining to external experiences have subsided, and when one single vritti is prevailing throughout everything, the sadhaka attains the pure stage of meditation. When this stage of a single vritti alone continues, and no other thought or vritti is felt in the least, one is said to have attained samprajnata samadhi. When the entire consciousness of the sadhaka is transformed into the form of the ishta to the extent that he is seen clearly, the ever-glowing darshan is known as samprajnata samadhi.

Does remembrance of the ishta devata lead to introversion?

Swami Satyananda: Remembrance of and emotional feeling for the ishta are prolegomena of introversion, but remembrance should follow the feeling once again. Only

then will one have access to the royal palace of *surati*, supreme awareness.

In other people, remembrance is followed by devotional feeling and that in turn is followed by *vikshepa*, distraction, retrogression. To check the course of retrogression, remembrance should be brought back again. During the full influx of remembrance the bhakta should give a sudden turn to it and merge himself in the Form. That is, accelerate feeling and devotional remembrance to their full and then suddenly dip the consciousness in the Form.

How does the ishta devata help one's meditation?

Swami Satyananda: Whether talking about the universal mind, or the individual mind, time and space are two opposite poles. When one is trying to concentrate to the point of the living experience, one is actually bringing time and space closer to each other. If they come to each other, they have to travel in opposite directions, and when they travel in opposite directions they meet at some point. The point at which they meet is the nucleus. The nucleus is the form on which one meditates.

Time and space meet in the ishta devata. Time and space meet in the symbol. It can be anything – a flower, wife, husband, the guru; it doesn't matter. Christ can be a symbol, Sri Rama can be a symbol, guru can be a symbol, even a pig can be a symbol provided it can hold the mind. Anything that can hold the mind is the best symbol. If it can't hold the mind, the mind runs away. When the symbol is there as a nucleus, time and space are moving closer to each other, and when they move closer to each other at some point they should meet. The point where they meet is the symbol, and the moment they meet there is an explosion. When there is an explosion, that explosion charges the kundalini.

Is the ishta devata also present in dhyana?

Swami Satyananda: Dhyana means thinking only of the ishta devata. *Dhyana* means 'attention, one-pointed awareness'.

If the ishta devata is Sri Rama – his photo, his murti, his vigraha must be seen as it is outside. The difference between external and internal must be finished. What is seen in the mandir should also be in one's heart. If it can be seen outside, why can't it be seen within? Because one has only outer eyes, not inner eyes. The inner Sri Rama, inner Sri Krishna, inner Vishnu can be seen only with the inner eyes. In order to develop the inner eye one should concentrate at the eyebrow centre, *trikuti* or *bhrumadhya*, the point between the two eyebrows. That is the seat of the third eye of Shiva. That point must be concentrated on.

What is the role of the guru?

Swami Satyananda: The basic principle is atma – Ishwara-tattwa, atmatattwa, parabrahma, parameshwara, anadi, avinashi, abhokta, akarta – the one who is beyond name, form, place, speech and the sense perceptions. To attain that ultimate principle, the ishta or the guru may be worshipped because they are not separate in essence, merely two forms. The principle is one and the same, whether one attains the ishta or the guru. The point is how to focus the mind which is forever running after maya, the mind that is so engrossed in worldly objects, the mind that is running after the shadow, the mirage. This fickle, capricious, covetous mind needs to be focused somewhere to make it one-pointed. A prop is needed to act as a focal point. The guru is necessary because he can act as a focal point.

Just as without formal admission one cannot enter a college, or without the marriage rituals two people cannot be called man and wife, similarly, until a person accepts someone as his guru he cannot be called a sadhaka or a pupil. Unless and until he has a guide, a guru, he cannot be a traveller on the spiritual path.

The guru shows the path; he directs and guides. The mantra the guru gives is the master key to all the locks of one's life. The spiritual masters have said that far ahead on this path of sadhana, there comes a stage where only

undivided awareness resides. Neither the ishta nor the guru survives. *Phutaa kumbha jala jala hi samaanaa*, which means that ‘when the ego breaks, when this puny, petty earthen pot of ‘I’ shatters, the water inside the pitcher and the water outside become one’. Therefore, there is no essential difference between the guru and the ishta.

In any science or field of knowledge, a guru is needed. There are two types of knowledge: empirical science, *apara vidya*, material, worldly knowledge; and transcendental science, *para vidya*, the science of God, *Brahma vidya*, knowledge of God. Whether one wants to become proficient in a transcendental or an empirical science, a guru is needed. Without a guru nobody can become proficient in either of these pursuits.

How can one know if the voice of the guru or ishta devata in a dream is real or imagined?

Swami Niranjanananda: That is a big problem. Initially, when one hears these voices it is good to doubt them in case there is no depth in those commands. People are extroverted and something that they feel could well be just their projection or conviction, a way of satisfying their desires. However, later on, as they meditate more and more and a link is created between the surface mind and the depth of mind, commands are not heard, they are seen, and those are the right ones. The image of the ishta devata or guru may manifest and say what has to be done. That would be the most reliable form of dream, considering the level of the average mentality.

Then there is the sudden urge, deep motivation or drive to do something. At this time one does not feel oneself to be different from either the ishta devata or the guru. That feeling of oneness, deep inside, will direct one’s actions, and one will begin to think, “this is not rational”, but nevertheless it will be like an obsession. These are the three stages and until one is able to convince oneself that, “Yes, this is the right message”, it is better to have it confirmed by the guru.

What are the rules regarding mantra and ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: In practices for spiritual attainment, emotions come into the picture. I have a strong feeling for Sri Rama, but my mantra is the Shiva mantra, not the Rama mantra. The mantra does not correspond to the ishta devata. It does not matter since I am not doing it for a particular purpose, but for the purification of inner awareness, to have a vision of the divine. First, the aspirant has to decide whether he wishes to practise for spiritual or worldly attainment.

In spiritual life, a guru is most important; there can be no two opinions about it. It is also true that one can visualize the guru and pray to him, but one should know that the ishta devata belongs to the esoteric, spiritual, divine, non-physical dimension.

Why is the specific function of the ishta mantra and ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: Ishta devata means that devata through whom one is trying to reach God. Ishta devata is that ladder by which one is trying to reach the roof; it is the road by which one is trying to reach the goal. Which road one takes is something that each person must decide.

Ishta mantra is the name and ishta devata is the form. Name and form are the two appellations of God. A form is necessary in choosing an ishta. Which is the form that appeals and what is the relationship with it? Is it a relationship of lover and beloved like Mirabai, a master-servant relationship like Hanuman, a mother and son relationship like Yashoda, or a friendship like Radha and Krishna?

In people's minds and brains there can be many portraits of God. Just as the light of the sun appears to be red through red glass, blue through blue glass, yellow through yellow glass, green through green glass and white through white glass; the sun is none of these. Similarly, there is a picture or form of God in every person's mind. *Jaki rahi bhavana jaisi,*

prabhu murata tina dekhi taisi – “As is one’s sentiment, so is one’s perception of the form of divinity.”

When God incarnates, He takes some form. Whenever God has granted someone a vision of Himself, it has been in some form. Whenever a rishi has written a song of praise, it has been of some particular form and figure. This does not mean that God is many. The clothes that one is wearing come from cotton. Many things have come out of cotton, a kurta, trousers, a sari or a bedspread, yet the cotton remains cotton. Similarly, God is not many – He is one. The stories may vary: Shiva lives in Kailash while Rama lives in Ayodhya; however, when one is meditating on the truth, there should not be confusion of this kind.

What inner experiences occur as one unites with the ishta devata?

Swami Satyananda: In the first stage the form is seen as one sees the picture. It means that one is still conscious of the external world. As soon as the awareness becomes single, and the feeling of love reaches its highest stage, and no other than the beloved is remembered, the immortal form of the ishta manifests as truly as one would like him to be. This takes place in the state of wholesale merger and non-dual awareness. The form is the same that is known, but so far has not been seen on account of sensual and mental limitations. When one has reached that stage, where one’s atma has become all-pervading due to the absence of sensual and mental limitations, one is able to see him.

As soon as the form is apprehended, he enters into the form. He is before one in that familiar *swaroopa*, form, meditated upon. He is conscious, yet he sits or stands quietly. One keeps on looking at him and he at one. This takes time. When he has been looked at for some time, emotions bubble forth, tears flow and mechanically one falls down at his feet.

As a sadhaka one should see that form continuously for not less than seven days. On the day following the manifestation, one should sit for meditation as usual, but

instead of meditating on the photo, one should bring into one's mind the scene of manifestation and thus awaken one's awareness. This process should be continued as long as the deity does not come to any place instantaneously. If one is able to see him whenever one wishes, one should start conversing with him and praying unto him. No sooner will one sit for meditation at this stage than he will be seen in his usual posture. Suddenly one breaks into emotions and bows down at his feet. He blesses one and disappears. Then one comes down to physical consciousness and faintly remembers the experience as if it were a distant dream. Joy and ananda become boundless. The mind becomes calm, quiet and serene. The power of magnetism grows intense. The voice grows sweet. One's prayers are fulfilled and one's questions answered. This achievement should never be exploited for personal ends.

There comes a stage where the lower self is completely transformed and fluctuations or mental screens are torn apart. Pure atmabhava dawns and the sadhaka becomes a *siddha*, a master of the mind, senses and body. Knowledge, revelation after revelation emerges spontaneously. One becomes powerful, full of wisdom, a *kalpa vriksha*, a wish-fulfilling tree, and a fit receptacle for *Brahma anubhava*, self-realization, which is the final goal.



The Form of Ishta

Samadhi is a blissful state of mind
Where there is no other experience except atma.
This too is consumed in full-fledged nirvikalpa
When not even a bit of the individual functions.

Savikalpa retains the experiences of atma
In the form of Ishta;
Nirvikalpa is at once homogeneous
Devoid of any subject or object.

Bhakta can talk to Ishta in the state of savikalpa,
There he feels close to his Lord,
He is so aware of his Lord
That he loses all self-consciousness.

He hears the divine speech of his Lord,
He finds all questions answered and wishes fulfilled,
He is taken back into the arena of his previous lives
Which he views with awe and wonder.

Then God becomes a concrete reality to him,
Guru becomes a divine power.
He truly feels his Ishta before him
Just as you see your living father before you.

The only difference is that you see your father
While you are aware of yourself
But in samadhi you see the Ishta
While you are unaware of yourself.

Having attained samadhi, bhakta becomes calm,
Peaceful, cheerful, powerful and intuitive;
A veritable medium of His grace and lila,
Atma manifests through him.

Body, action and thought are divinized,
Everything moves according to His wish.
This is difficult to follow through intellect
But you will experience it when you attain samadhi.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati

4

Prayer

Prayer is the mystic bridge built across the gap between God and man.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

COMMUNION WITH GOD

What is the purpose of prayer?

Swami Niranjanananda: The purpose of prayer is to find the source of strength within, to reconnect with the concept of a higher force guiding one's life.

What is prayer?

Swami Sivananda: Prayer is depending on God for help in distress. Prayer is giving God an opportunity to comfort the devotee. Prayer is lightening the heaviness of one's heart by opening it to God. Prayer is expecting God to decide what is best when one is in a dilemma. From despair man learns prayer.

Prayer is not asking. Prayer is communion with God through single-minded devotion. Prayer is nearness to God, tuning the mind with God. Prayer is surrendering oneself to God completely. Prayer is melting the mind and ego in silence in God. Prayer represents a mystic state when the individual consciousness is absorbed in God.

Prayer is uplifting the soul to God. It is an act of love and adoration to Him. It is worship of God and glorification of God. It is thanksgiving to God for all His blessings. Prayer is an invocation, a calling forth of spiritual forces ever flowing through the human heart, mind and soul. It is a mighty spiritual force and as real as the force of gravity or attraction.

Prayer is the very soul and essence of religion. It is the very core of man's life. No one can live without prayer. It is the highest aspiration of the soul and communion with God must be one's daily aspiration. The road to God is the road of prayer, purity, service and love.

What is the difference between mantra and prayer?

Swami Niranjanananda: Prayer is to reach the expression of the heart to God. The devotee has troubles; they are expressed to him. The devotee has to express gratitude through prayer. Mantra is to make one introverted and reach the depths of one's being. Mantra connects one to oneself and prayer expresses one's bhavana.

Can everyone pray?

Swami Sivananda: Everyone can pray. The blind, the deaf and the lame, the armless, the puny, the ignorant and debased, the lowliest and the forlorn – all can pray to God, for prayer belongs to the heart.

Prayer does not demand high intelligence or eloquence. God wants the heart when one prays. Even a few words from a humble pure soul, though illiterate, will appeal to the Lord more than the eloquent flowing words of an orator or pandit.

A child does not know grammar and pronunciation, but when it utters some sounds the mother understands. When others can understand the language of the heart, what to say of the *antaryamin*, the inner ruler? He knows what one wishes to say. Even if one makes mistakes in one's prayers to Him, even if there are mistakes in the mantras one recites, if one is sincere, if the prayer comes from the heart, He listens to it, for He understands the language of the heart.

During prayer, does one engage both the mind and the heart?

Swami Niranjanananda: Prayer is heart talk, and it becomes effective when it is isolated from the mind, when it is purely a heart feeling. When all the external doors of the mind are closed, then only one door opens: the internal door, the door of the heart. When the crookedness of the mind has been stilled, when the agitations of the mind have become peaceful, when the deviousness and dubious nature of the mind has been transformed, then the heart becomes active.

Prayers that come from the heart go straight to God. That is the direct phone line. If one ever wants to phone God, one should not use the public call office of the head, but the private call office of the heart. Then there will be a direct connection.

All one has to do is to change the sentence “God is nowhere” to “God is now here.” Prayer is the song of the heart, and this prayer is the connection, the telephone line, which will always be heard.

What is the best time for prayer?

Swami Satyananda: When love for God is overflowing, then one takes the help of prayers and seizes this golden opportunity. When the devotional impulses overflow beyond limits, at that time prayer becomes immensely powerful.

Is every prayer heard by God?

Swami Sivananda: Prayer should spring from the heart. It should not be lip homage. Empty prayer is like a sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. Prayer that comes from a sincere, pure heart is at once heard by the Lord. The prayer of a cunning, crooked, wicked person is never heard.

God ever responds to the appeal of His sincere devotees. It is only the insincere person who says that God is deaf. God is ever watching for the distress signals of His children. When the heart is opened to Him without reservations, the response will be instantaneous. He prays best who loves best all creatures. Love is God and God is love.

What is the place of prayer in yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a place of prayer in life. Prayer has relevance in life, as it helps one connect with another energy or reality which is superior. When one is aware of that higher reality or energy which is transcendental to one's prayers, then for that period one disassociates from the world and the expression of the mind and one connects with the expression of the heart.

Prayer is just a letter that one writes explaining the difficulties one is having to somebody who one thinks can help solve the problems. It is as simple as that. Therefore, one should keep on writing the letter and pray. The prayers will reach God, so one should just keep on praying and letting Him decide what is best.

How is prayer to be practised?

Swami Sivananda: The breath has been given by God to be spent in prayer. Therefore, the devotee should kneel down and pray, and not let the prayer cease on rising. Prayer should be lifelong and life should be one long prayer. One can pray to the Lord in any way one likes. He is sure to hear for He can hear even the footfall of an ant.

There are no problems that cannot be dissolved by prayer, no sufferings that cannot be allayed by prayer, no difficulties that cannot be surmounted by prayer, and no evil that cannot be overcome by prayer. Prayer is the miracle by which God's power flows into human beings.

When within the bosom rage the storms of lust and anger, vanity and viciousness, one should kneel down and pray. For the Lord, and He alone, has power over the elements. In supplication is strength. One will be filled with His blessings, protected by His grace, shielded by His mercy and spurred on the path of righteousness by His divine will. Therefore, prayer should not be for earthly goods, nor for heavenly pleasures, but for His grace. "Thy will be done my Lord! I want nothing" should be the prayer and that His righteousness may descend on the soul of all.

The bhakta should greet the dawn of the day and bid adieu to the setting sun with a prayer of thankfulness, first for a fresh day granted and last for His grace received. Thus shall one's life be blessed and thus one will radiate His blessings all around.

How powerful is prayer?

Swami Satyananda: Prayer should be pure, straight and spontaneous. On prayer alone depends the success of many things. One should have full faith that the object of prayer listens to everything. Prayer has the power to destroy the rough elements in one's culture. Thus prayer is also a destroyer of sin. No one should doubt this. Prayer is a form of self-realization. Sincere and loving prayer unifies one's mental tendencies and makes one fit to receive the divine experience and light.

What are the benefits of prayer?

Swami Sivananda: Prayer is spiritual food for the soul, it is a spiritual tonic. There is nothing so purifying as prayer. The power of prayer is indescribable. It should be done with reverence and with a heart wet with faith and devotion. If one prays regularly, one's life will be gradually changed and moulded. Prayer must become habitual. One will feel as if one cannot live without prayer.

Prayer lightens the heart and fills the mind with peace, strength and purity. When the mind becomes pure and sattwic through the power of prayer, the intellect becomes sharp and keen. Prayer elevates the mind. Prayer links the aspirant with the inexhaustible cosmic powerhouse of energy, *hiranyagarbha*, and thus draws power, energy, light and strength from Him.

Prayer is the trusty companion along the weary path of moksha. It is the rock to which man can cling when he is drowning in the ocean of samsara. Prayer frees the devotee from the fear of death. It brings him nearer to God and makes him feel the divine consciousness and his essential immortal blissful nature.

Prayer is an unfailing remedy for all situations. It cleanses the dross and steadies the mind. It washes off the impurities of the heart with pure waters of spiritual emotions, corrects the defects and shortcomings and prepares the mind for the reception of self-knowledge. In times of danger and calamity, mass prayer works wonders. Prayer for the departed souls bestows peace on them.

Prayer is as real as the force of gravity. It can reach a realm where reason is too feeble to enter. It can work miracles. Its magnanimous efficacy is indescribable. Its potency can hardly be comprehended without actual experience. Prayer, worship and mantras possess real power. The believer gains through his faith. The unbeliever does not obtain this gain. Sincere prayer to the Lord will draw His grace and bestow supreme blessedness.

Prayer is an artless opening of the chamber of the heart for the descent of divine light. There is a vital union between faith and prayer. The power of faith is irresistible. It will not go in vain. Faith is a great thing. It decides the extent to which revelation and illumination be given to man. Each one receives in accordance with the degree of his faith. Believe and be firm in faith.

What is the power of prayer?

Swami Sivananda: Prayer is a mighty spiritual force. Prayers are powerful spiritual currents. Prayer has tremendous influence. If the prayer is sincere and if it proceeds from the bottom of the heart it will at once melt the heart of the Lord. Sri Krishna had to run barefooted from Dwaraka on hearing the heartfelt prayer of Draupadi. Hari, the mighty ruler of this universe, apologized before Prahlad for coming to his rescue a little late. How merciful and loving is God!

Prayer can move mountains and work miracles, when said even once from the bottom of the heart, “O Lord, I am Thine. Thy will be done. Have mercy on me. I am Thy servant. Forgive. Guide. Protect. Enlighten.” Said with a meek receptive attitude of mind, with the right inner attitude,

prayer is at once heard and responded to. In the daily battle of life one can realize for oneself the high efficacy of prayer. One must have strong conviction in the existence of God.

How important is prayer to a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Prayer can be addressed to a deity or to God through a song of devotion which seeks blessings. In the *Rig Veda*, the prayers offered to the deities are in the form of hymns, called *suktas*. These hymns are addressed to deities such as Agni, Indra, Mitra, Yama, Marut and others. These deities represent the various aspects of the same Paramatman, the Almighty Supreme Self.

Does prayer change as the devotee evolves?

Swami Sivananda: According to Ghazali, the Muslim mystic, prayer has three stages: verbal, mental and merging with God's will. In the first stage the devotee sings the glory of God, chants His praise and pours out his anguish of heart in melodious hymns. Secondly, when the mind becomes calm, when the outgoing senses have been restrained by sustained practice, when the mind cannot be easily affected by evil influences, prayer becomes mental. No physical effort is needed.

In the third stage, when the mind is concentrated in the Divine and loses its outward attractions and becomes serene and devoid of desires or cravings, prayer becomes automatic, natural and habitual. It reaches its highest stage. Divine will becomes the devotee's will, for God who is invoked by the devotee's prayer merges in his mind, in his will. There is no self-consciousness for the devotee; he abides in God, his mind being entirely saturated with Him. He perceives nothing external, nor anything internal; he even forgets that he is praying to God, that he is absorbed in God's will. He has only one experience – oneness with God.

Prayer is full of deep, serene emotions, coupled with sincerity. When it is more emotional than sincere, it becomes rather spiritless and therefore ineffective and a direct response is not received from God.

Prayer has its consequences, and the nature of its response depends mainly upon the inner nature of the person who prays – temperament, the object in view, the requirements, faith and sincerity.

Sometimes the main object of prayer becomes selfish, grossly earthy, unreasonable and irrational. People crave for selfish ends, for the fulfilment of material desires. At times they may even venture to pray for a bad wish. It is here that its negative consequences are experienced. Essentially, prayer should be as far as possible selfless. One should first pray for the good of others, for the welfare and peace of the world and for one's own spiritual evolution. One should pray for the eradication of negative qualities, for wisdom, knowledge, goodness and saintliness.

Aasato ma sat gamaya

Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya

Mrityor ma amritam gamaya

Lead me from the unreal to the Real,
Lead me from darkness to Light,
Lead me from mortality to Immortality.

This is the best prayer; the prayer for light, truth and immortality. The foremost prayer of an aspirant should be for the removal of ignorance. His goal is to realize the truth and to free himself from the meshes of that which is unreal. His goal is to realize his essential divine nature.

At times even sincere prayer is not responded to. This, however, should never be allowed to mar one's faith or sincerity or to discourage and depress, but should be considered as a necessity, to test one's sincerity, serenity and faith in God.

Often God tests the devotee with the severest of trials, but does it mean that He is unkind and that He does not wish to pay heed to prayers? It is only a test which the aspirant must pass through. His faith may not be strong enough, his heart and mind may not have become pure yet.

The aspirant can only strengthen his faith, cleanse the dross of the mind and purify his heart through tests, trials and tribulations. Just as gold is purified by passing through a crucible several times, so also the heart must become pure and the faith unflinching by passing through the crucible of trials again and again. At the ultimate end, prayers are fulfilled and gratified with the highest fulfilment. Therefore, when praying to God or wishing to receive grace from Him, the devotee must be prepared to accept joyfully His lack of response and even trials and tribulations.

How does prayer work?

Swami Niranjanananda: God hears all prayers and if He answers a prayer, it is not because He is happy with the devotee, but because He wants to enforce faith in Him. If one prays for something and it is fulfilled due to the grace of God, it is only because God wants to develop and intensify one's faith. If one prays to God and He takes time to help, it is because He wants one to cultivate patience. If one prays to God and He does not answer the prayers, it is because He knows one is capable of doing things oneself and does not need His help. If one prays to God and there is nobody nearby to help, God will inspire someone who will come and help one out.

The real love of the heart is realized only when there is a connection with God. Otherwise, what one experiences is sensual and sensorial love, nothing beyond. The concept of love is not a connection with the divine through which one can spread love all around.

What is the ideal form of prayer?

Swami Satyananda: Prayer must come out in the form of perfect self-expression. Whether it is asking for something or communicating with the inner self, prayer is not conducted through the medium of the mind. It is purely an expression of one's inner feelings. In bhakti yoga it is called *bhavana*, which means the 'expressions of one's inner

being'. The expression of one's inner being is devotion. The expression of the mind, emotions or passions is called sentiment.

According to raja yoga, working on the more or less psychological technicalities, it is said that one listens to one's own prayers. That is subjective. According to bhakti yoga, the listener is not the individual. There is a higher Self within that is listening apart from this little self.

How can one identify 'true prayer'?

Swami Satyananda: Prayer that is true and original is at once heard and accepted by the Lord. Borrowed prayers are not original. Classical prayers are not true. True and original prayer is that prayer which represents one's inner condition and is expressed in the language one understands well.

Can one use a prayer rather than a mantra?

Swami Niranjanananda: Prayer is a way of linking one's awareness with the cosmic awareness. However, the normal concept of prayer is praying to attain something, either peace, prosperity, progeny, or whatever one desires. Prayer does not involve concentration, whereas mantra does. A mantra is chanted or repeated in a meditative state in which one shuts out the influence of the world and focuses on oneself. This is one of the major differences between prayer and mantra. It does not mean that prayers are not powerful. Prayer is powerful, especially if it comes from the heart. For the fulfilment of prayer, sincerity of heart is important. If prayers are done in that manner then they also become mantras as they evoke certain emotions like faith, closeness to the higher Self or God. If this is the method of praying, then mantra may not be necessary.

However, prayers are religious by nature and they reflect belief systems, the cultural traditions one has grown up with, a state of mental and psychological conditioning. There is nothing wrong with this. Mantra plays a slightly different role. When the yogis conceived the mantras, they had the

psychic and spiritual component in mind rather than the religious component. People are multidimensional and mantra works more at the subtle and psychic levels, not at the level of emotion or belief.

Why does prayer not need to be taught?

Swami Satyananda: Prayer cannot be taught in a school or a convent. Prayer need not be taught at all. Everyone has within the virtue of praying, which can be manifested by means of bhakti. What one needs to know is that within there lies a divine force, which, if awakened, can render anything possible. One has to beware of artificial, ambiguous, borrowed and mechanical prayers. They will have to be kept out of the list.

Can there be prayers that come from the intellect?

Swami Satyananda: The prayers often heard in ashrams, temples and in mass congregations are anything but 'prayers'. They are surface superimpositions which, when needed, dwindle into airy nothings. Such prayers belong to the department of intellect, while I wish to awaken that prayer which is an expression of the inner bhava and feelings.

PRAYER AS PETITION

How should one pray and what should one pray for?

Swami Sivananda: The devotee should pray for at least five minutes daily, when getting out of bed and when going to sleep. Prayers should first be for peace and prosperity of the world, then for one's own enlightenment and strength to fight one's weaknesses.

The devotee should not pray for relief from suffering, but for strength and endurance to bear it. He may pray for relief of the suffering of others, and for humility and right knowledge for himself.

How should one pray to God?

Swami Satyananda: One should pray in all love, humility and confidence. The prayer mixed with emotion and feeling is at once heard and fulfilled. One does not simply utter Sanskrit slokas which are not even understood. One should pray to Him like a child. One should remember any event in one's life when the prayer was heard and fulfilled. One should recollect the state of one's mind at that time.

The devotee prays with perfect faith, love and emotion that He will listen to the prayer and fulfil it. He never prays for trifling things. The devotee prays to Him for strength to face life; for viveka, vairagya, love and service; for purity of mind; for meditation and celibacy. He prays to Him to come face to face and reveal knowledge. The devotee has faith that God is all-merciful and a kind father, and that He will give what is asked for. He prays for quick spiritual evolution and for understanding His merciful acts and loving blessings.

When one feels like doing sadhana, one should pray to God and ask, "What should I do?" He Himself will give the inspiration and show the way. God has shown the way to Mirabai, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. He showed the way to those who sought His advice. Whoever sought the way with a true heart and laboured for it was shown the way by the Lord. The true way is only one: remain a servant of God. Mirabai used to pray to the Lord to keep her as His servant. In his book *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore expresses his feelings and deep desire in the following prayer:

Give me the strength to bear the joys and sorrows;
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service;
Give me the strength never to disown the poor.

How does a bhakta pray to God for guidance?

Swami Sivananda: Children pray to their parents, elders and guardians at the time of need, seeking their help and guidance. When they grow into adolescence they learn to pray to themselves, to their latent abilities and strengths;

they try to be self-supported without being dependent on another's aid. However, there is a limitation to this prayer. When one feels in need of something else which is beyond one's capacity, which is not always humanly possible, one resigns oneself to God and prays for His help and guidance. Evidently His response is felt, an all-potent inner force that listens to the prayers and fulfils them the moment there is a little sincerity and faith.

The devotee resigns himself to God, surrendering his ego at His feet. He forgets about the world and thinks of nothing else but God alone who would surely save him, and who alone is able to help and guide him. He aligns his will with God's and acts as per His guidance. There is no sense of individuality or doership in him – he knows God's will is his will, and he must act up to it. Does that mean that he is shorn of self-effort? Certainly not, for he negates himself and resigns himself to the Lord. To him divine grace flows instantly. His nature is divinized and so he naturally exerts himself in the right direction. Indeed, the act of self-surrender is self-effort of the highest order.

A Vedantin's prayer is essentially the prayer to the Self within, to Himself, to the Cosmic Consciousness that is immanent in all. In the initial stage he considers his prayer as a sort of desire, either earthly or spiritual, either with motive or without motive. Then, when he sufficiently advances in his sadhana, he considers his so-called desire as God's will which finally opens his intuitive spiritual sight and becomes one with the cosmic will.

The worship of any deity through prayer is upasana of the one and same God. In prayer the upasaka remembers his deity, praises Him, offers milk, fruits, honey, nuts, and asks Him for blessings of goodness, wealth or self-realization. When chanting prayers, remember the divinity of God repeatedly, and gradually uplift the mind towards the Divine. If one prays to God for purity, devotion, light and knowledge, one will obtain these things.

Is it wrong to ask God for things?

Swami Satyananda: Sometimes bhakti is motivated by a fear that God will be annoyed. People perform pooja lest they lose their children or become a widow or a widower. Pooja is done out of fear! There is no need to be scared of God. There is no harm in asking Him for favours sometimes, with a pure mind like that of a child who asks his parents for something. It is not wrong to ask favours from God. Since one lives in this world and tends to get into difficult situations, it is not wrong to ask Him for help to overcome the hurdles.

One can ask but should make a promise also. Many people say that God should not be asked for anything. Why do people feel shy about asking God for something? Why have they made this law not to ask God for anything? They won't demand anything from God, but all wealth belongs to Him. He is the Landlord, the Master of all wealth. If they do not ask Him, then whom do they intend to ask? Man has always been demanding. If he stops asking for things, the Lord will have no work. There should be no hesitation in asking God for something. One should not feel any guilt. However, if one asks Him for something small, one should make a small promise to Him as well. Once I asked Him for a big thing, but I promised Him a big thing as well. So when asking for something from the divine Mother, for a son, for wealth or anything else, do not say, "I will give you two hundred and fifty grams of sweets." Give something such that even the Lord Almighty becomes happy.

Bhakti is not begging God to marry off one's daughters without much expenditure. That is like shooting a mosquito with an automatic rifle. Praying to God to cure one's disease or for more money is treating God as a doctor, a cashier or a treasurer. This is meaningless. It has been said:

Lovers of God
Are anxious, in vain,
About food and clothing.

Will the Nourisher of the world
Not provide these things to His servants?

Praying to God to make one's children happy is like suggesting God is ignorant and needs to be told about their unhappiness. God is called omniscient and the saviour of the poor and needy on the one hand, and on the other hand He is being instructed about what He should do. Therefore, one should stop such begging at once.

Are there various types of prayer?

The various types of prayer are illustrated in a simple parable of the good-natured millionaire who lived in a small town. Three beggars thought of approaching him for help. The first man went to the millionaire and said, "O master! I want five rupees. Please give me five rupees." The millionaire was taken aback by the man's impudence. "What! You demand five rupees from me as though I owe you the money! How dare you? How can I afford to give five rupees to a single beggar? Here, take these two rupees and get away," he said.

The man went away with the two rupees. The next beggar went to the millionaire and said, "Maharaj! I have not taken a square meal for the past ten days. Please help me." "How much do you want?" asked the millionaire. "Whatever you wish to give me, Maharaj," replied the beggar. The millionaire told the beggar, "Here, take this ten-rupee note. You can have nice meals for at least three days." The beggar walked away with the ten-rupee note.

The third beggar came and said, "Maharaj, I have heard about your noble qualities. Therefore, I have come to have your darshan. Men of such charitable disposition are verily the manifestations of God on earth." "Please sit down," said the millionaire. "You appear to be tired. Please take this food," he said, and offered food to the beggar. "Now please tell me what I can do for you." "Maharaj," replied the beggar, "I merely came to have the darshan of the noble

personage that you are. You have given me this rich food already. What more need I get from you? You have already shown extraordinary kindness towards me. May God bless you!" The millionaire, struck by the beggar's spirit, begged him to remain with him. He then built a decent house for the beggar in his own compound, and looked after him for the rest of his life.

God is like the good millionaire. Three classes of people approach him, with three desires and prayers. There is the greedy man full of vanity and arrogance. He demands the objects of worldly enjoyment from God. Since this man, whatever be his desires, has had the good sense to approach God, he grants him some part of the desired objects. The other type of devotee prays to the Lord for relief from the sufferings of the world, but is better than the first one, inasmuch as he is ready to abide by His will. To him the Lord grants full relief from suffering, and bestows on him much wealth and property.

The third type is the bhakta; he knows the nature of God. He merely prays to the Lord, "O Lord, you are Satchid-ananda; you are existence-absolute, knowledge-absolute, bliss-absolute." What does he want? Nothing. But the Lord is highly pleased with his spirit of renunciation, desirelessness and self-surrender. Therefore, He makes him eat His own food by granting him supreme devotion. For ever after, this jnani bhakta dwells in the Lord's abode as a liberated sage.

Have you ever asked God for something?

Swami Satyananda: I have asked God for something only once in my life and I am still seeking His pardon for that. In 1963, I was completely broken and at Triyambakeshwar I prayed to Him. My guru had asked me to propagate yoga, to make it popular. Yet from 1956 to 1960 I could not do anything. Nobody listened to me because I was most unimpressive. So, I went to my ishta deva and said, "I want to fulfil my guru's command. I want yoga to move forward like a bulldozer for twenty years. Please grant me this boon!" He said, "So shall

it be.” At the same time I made a promise, which was, “I will give up all that I create by Your grace; I will have nothing to do with it.” I fulfilled this promise.

I am using the word ‘bulldozer’ purposely. It was never like working with a pickaxe and spade. It was a stupendous and massive feat that attained out and out success. I became ensnared for a quarter of a century as a result of that one sentence of prayer.

How is prayer related to the law of karma?

Swami Satyananda: Prayer for the fulfilment of a wish is powerful if done properly. It has its own laws. Whatever an individual does concerns him alone, not his parents, partner or children. If one’s wish is made properly then it is like a bombshell. However, when one makes a wish one must also pledge to renounce something. If a woman wishes for a child, she has to pledge something in return, which is equivalent to the child. God made me victorious globally and I pledged to return that.

Praying for the fulfilment of a wish is not a simple matter. It has a deep relationship with God. If a person takes ten rupees out of his pocket, he must replace it with something. This is the law of karma. Everyone has to follow these laws, whether it be Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, or Satyananda; nobody can erase them. The *kriyaman karma*, actions not yet performed, can be altered; even *sanchit karma*, the stored actions, can be altered; but *prarabdha karma*, destined actions, cannot be altered by any ritual or anushthana. For these karmas, an adjustment has to be made. A prayer for wish-fulfilment is one such type of adjustment.

It is dangerous to pray to God and ask for something. Who knows, if God decides to fulfil the wish, one will be trapped forever. Now, I do not make any prayers to God for He knows what I need. I caution anyone to think twice before begging God for something. He knows everybody and their ways through and through. He knows their tricks. God is watching everybody twenty-four hours of the day, with eyes

fully open. He knows one's innermost secrets and intentions. He is watching one's every breath, counting each beat of one's heart, watching each step.

How should one pray?

Swami Sivananda: Even when the dacoit or thief prays, God helps him. Devotees get up in the early morning and say a prayer for physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. They become as simple as children and open the chambers of the heart freely. Sincere devotees know well about the high efficacy of prayers.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

How should one approach God through prayer?

Swami Satyananda: The last stanza in the *Ramacharitamanas* is a prayer: "Just as a passionate man is immersed in the thought of his woman, just as a greedy man is always neurotic about gold, in the same way, God should become dear to me. Wherever I may be born, as an insect, as a reptile, as an elephant, a dog or a donkey, in any life I may be born, I don't care. I have no choice, but I have one choice – I should become aware of God."

In the same stanza it says, "I do not want fulfilment of desires. I do not want to have liberation. I don't want to see You either. God, I don't want to come out of the cycle of birth and death. I don't want to become a good man either, but life after life, my mind must be conscious of Your lotus feet."

What can one ask for from the one who knows everything? Instead, one should pray like a poor beggar, like a bankrupt to Him, "My Lord, I am so weak, so imperfect, so full of vices, only you can redeem me and make me worthy." Money, position and social status matter little with God. One should seek oneness with God. One should ask for attunement with God. One should have a close relationship with God. Whichever deity one feels closest to should be approached with full humility and egolessness. When a dog

is rebuked its ears droop and it bows before one. The devotee should be like a dog in front of God – His obedient and loyal dog. It is unnecessary to ask God for everything. God has already given everything. God knows everything and He knows one's needs.

Does God only understand the language of the heart?

Swami Satyananda: God hears and answers the prayer that emanates from the heart. God does not know Hindi, Urdu or English; God is completely illiterate. He only knows the language of the heart. While reading the *Bhagavad Gita* or Koran, one day one's voice will emerge from the heart, then He will understand that someone is knocking on His door. To call God, one must speak the language of the heart, not the language of the scriptures. God does not understand the language of the scriptures. Mothers also know the language of the heart of the child. The lover knows the language of the heart of the beloved. God knows the language of the heart of the devotee. God knows the language of the heart, but most people do not know the language of the heart. It is not taught in the universities. People do not know His language, nor does He know theirs. Therefore, there is no communication with God.

When does God hear our prayers?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is written in the *Mahabharata* that when the sari was being pulled from Draupadi's body she asked everybody for help. Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Dritarashtra, the elders, the husbands; she asked everyone for help. However, they only put their heads down in shame. When nobody came to help her and the doors of help from outside were closed in her life, she called out to God and God heard it. At that moment there was nobody nearby to whom He could pass on the message. Even Bhishma had shut his ears. He was the Grandsire of the clan, yet he had shut his ears to the cry of Draupadi. Therefore, there was nobody who would help and the Lord came Himself and

gave limitless cloth to Draupadi. This only happened when the cry came from the heart. Prayer has to be from the heart and not from the mind. Prayer should not be based on desires and expectations and the need to fulfil them, but on the innocence of the heart.

How can one be receptive to divine experience?

Swami Satyananda: Sincere and loving prayer will unify the mental tendencies and make one fit to receive the divine experience and light. Those with restless minds cannot hear or understand God's words. Therefore, it is necessary to quieten the mind by any method. Yoga is an important way. God is wherever one is. He does not have to be searched for anywhere else. God is not far away. He is closer than one's own breath, closer than one's own prana, closer than one's own mind. He is one's closest companion, friend, prana, life, eyes and ears. All one's energy is His. One is the grandeur of God. This is how one has to think.

God's blessings are for everyone. If a corked bottle, a plate and an empty glass are placed in the pouring rain, the bottle will remain empty because it is corked and the plate will contain more water than the glass. Similarly, God's words and blessings are pouring down everywhere, but one's mind needs to open more.

How can one be sure a prayer reaches God?

Swami Satyananda: For man this world is everything. It gives so much comfort, money and passion that no one is disillusioned. Only when people realize that this world is a limited pleasure will love come out. That particular love is hidden within a hard shell. It will not break now when calamity after calamity comes. When man realizes that the love of the world is not fulfilling, his mind will turn towards the inner self and then whatever he prays reaches Him.

Drinking champagne, dressing well, eating good food, going to church on Sunday and praying – nothing will reach Him. However, when one is in distress and everywhere there

is darkness, a prayer made will reach Him. The prayer of one in distress reaches Him, but the prayer of one who is acting does not reach Him.

People act in a temple, in a synagogue or a church. It is not real prayer. One can pray the whole night, but is has to be spontaneous. One does not even have to utter a word, one has to feel it, feel total passion, feel total attachment.

Nothing in the world is within man's control. He is controlled by external forces. Parents have no control over their sons or daughters. How can they when they are not in control of their own mind? Many people take a vow in the evening, but by morning it has evaporated.

God does not go into details. He just understands people's feelings. God is like a child. So even if one does not understand the meaning of the prayer, if one just feels, "God, I am helpless, help me," that's enough. When a baby cries he doesn't say, "Mummy, I want milk." It is the *bhavana*, the emotion, the real feeling that comes. The mother somehow understands he needs milk. This is the right time in this present age of Kali Yuga for a divine power to descend and set to right everything that is wrong.

What is the ultimate form of prayer?

Swami Satyananda: If prayer is made for the welfare, well-being, prosperity of one's family or others, it becomes immediately efficacious. Such prayers purify the mind of the person who prays, and at the same time make the thought force more potent.

Prayer has two forms: silence is a form of prayer, and words and feelings are a form of prayer. When a yogi retires from the affairs of life and enters into silence, he is within his own self, uniting with or trying to unite with his own being. That is also a prayer. Christ used to take his disciples into seclusion to pray. It was not a prayer that is sung in temples or churches. Christ was actually taking his disciples into retreat to practise communication with the inner self. That was the prayer. Some people believe that prayer means

asking for something. The other meaning of prayer is not asking for something, but communicating with one's own inner being. Everybody cannot do this because they do not know the way. One may succeed intellectually, but intellectual communication is of no significance. Inner communication is not a process of thinking: 'I'll close my eyes and try to think that I am with God and I am one with God'. That is surely hypnosis.

As communication with the inner self is extremely difficult, the saints and sages have composed prayers. Actually, they did not compose the prayers; they revealed them when they were in the higher spirit. It is the poets and ordinary people who have composed the prayers.

In the beginning an aspirant has to take the help of these prayers to conduct his own feelings. However, there comes a moment when words fail and the language is of no avail, expressions become mute, there is a total feeling. During moments of extreme suffering or joy, expression fails and one does not know what to say or express. When the dualities of consciousness are about to fuse into each other and one is in absolute communication, these external prayers will not have any significance or relevance.



5

God's Will

God is a great artist. This world is His masterpiece.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

CONNECTING TO THE DIVINE WILL

How can one understand ‘Thy will be done’?

Swami Sivananda: The entire creation is the play of God. We are all so many toys in His hands. After tossing us about here and there, goading us to run hither and thither, and making us do various actions, He stands aloof and watches our success and failure, joy and sorrow. Tired of these worldly ways, the devotee seeks His lotus feet for rest and peace. Then God sweetly whispers into his ears that it was all His doing! It was only a means to bring us to Him, in complete surrender. When a long cherished dream is realized, it is because He willed it so. When it is smashed, even then it is because He willed it so! What a joke! “O my Beloved Lord and Master, Thy will be done! I want nothing in this world.”

What is God's will?

Swami Satyananda: God's will, also known as the divine will, is a universal reality. It is the most powerful force that conducts each and every activity, seen as well as unseen. When people are attracted by maya, they are led far away from this divine

will and become weak, full of fear and anxiety. Once they transcend the barriers of the mind, they begin to realize the will of God, which is the destiny of creation. Once they know the will of God, they know how to manage His affairs and how to work.

As long as there are personal desires, even spiritual life remains a matter of ambition. There will be not one but many problems. One may practise yoga, but there has to be an important and central philosophy: ‘Thy will be done.’ When this philosophy emanates from the depths of the whole being, then whatever is faced in life becomes a matter of joy rather than a psychological or psycho-emotional problem.

In fact, there are no real problems in life. People only think they have problems because they do not understand life in the light of divine will. In this world there is everything – rivers, oceans, deserts, mountains, valleys, forests – but when one stays in the desert, the desert becomes a problem. If one stays in the valley that too becomes a problem. People are dissatisfied with life for they have not tried to understand its universal aspect. They see things in a limited sense. That is why there are problems, not only in the lives of sincere spiritual aspirants, but in people everywhere.

Is it possible to act only with devotion to God, without desiring the fruits?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Krishna said yes. It is possible to act without desires and without a mind. He asked Arjuna to act on the faith and belief that whatever he does is the work of God. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, He said almost at the end of His teaching (18:66):

*Sarvadharmānparityajya maamekam śaranam vraja;
Aham tvāa sarvapaāpebhyo mokṣayishyāmi maa śuṅhah.*

Abandoning all duties, take refuge in Me (God) alone:
I will liberate thee from all sins; grieve not.

What is the relationship between yoga practice and connecting to God's will?

Swami Niranjanananda: Disciplines are social in nature, whereas anushasana is personal and spiritual in nature. 'Think before you act, don't react' is an anushasana. 'Sit down quietly and still the mind' is an anushasana; it is a mandate. 'Perfect harmony in your life' is an anushasana; it is a mandate of yoga. Yoga is nothing but a set of anushasana by which one can come closer to the inner spirit, the inner nature, and only after that does the philosophy "Let Thy will be done" evolve in life.

How can one change the attitude to connect with God's will?

Swami Niranjanananda: Right now it is, "God, you do my will then I will think of you." Worship is offered in temples with the hope that God will grant offspring, with the hope of overcoming a problem at home, with the family, the workplace, with the hope of having financial security. Nobody has searched for God with a pure heart. Nobody has worshipped God without a selfish reason. There is a verse by Adi Shankaracharya:

Oh God! Forgive my three great sins.
My first sin was asking you for things,
Forgetting that you are omniscient.
I looked for you in different nooks and corners,
In temples, in churches, in homes, in mosques,
In gurudwaras, in shrines, in ashrams, in monasteries,
Forgetting that you are omnipresent.
I dared to think about you,
Forgetting that you are beyond all thought.
I dared to speak about you,
Forgetting that you are beyond words.

This is Ishwara pranidhana. When the devotee and God are not two beings but *Tat Twam Asi* – "I am That", then that stage is known as Ishwara pranidhana: Let Thy will be done

and make me an instrument of Thy peace. Wherever there is discord let me sow love. That is Ishwara pranidhana. This stage cannot be achieved by thinking only. One has to create the right ground for it to be nurtured in life; one has to think along these lines as well.

How does one know when one is acting in harmony with God's will?

Swami Satyananda: If one is doing something for Him, there will be no questions. When one is fulfilling His command, there will be no doubts in the mind. The mind becomes absolutely clear, like crystal. Swami Sivananda used to say that the divine voice was the guide. That voice can be heard in silence. It is not always expressed in words but experienced as a heart consciousness.

What qualities does one need to experience connection with God's will?

Swami Niranjanananda: The highest practice one can do to cultivate spiritual awareness is Ishwara pranidhana, which is the final niyama. *Ishwara pranidhana* means 'Let Thy will be done'. Allowing oneself to be the recipient of the divine will is the highest virtue that can be cultivated. It is the highest state of mind that can be developed and experienced. It is the culmination of jnana, the culmination of bhakti and the culmination of karma. When *jnana*, knowledge, *bhakti*, faith or love, and *karma*, behaviour or performance, fuse into one and are directed to the fulfilment of the divine will, then that becomes the highest state one can aspire for as a spiritual aspirant. Ishwara pranidhana indicates letting go of the personal hang-ups, the personal attachments and the holding onto things that we consider dear.

Contentment, *santosha*, comes before Ishwara pranidhana. Ishwara pranidhana is the last of the yamas and niyamas of Sage Patanjali. Beyond that, there is no other yama or niyama. Being the tenth, Ishwara pranidhana indicates that a certain amount of preparation has taken place already and

one is experiencing the divine will. Through the generation of faith and innocence, letting go of the self-oriented, self-centred awareness, one is able to finally tune oneself to God's energy or guru's energy.

Ishwara pranidhana also indicates a level of surrender wherein one is not subject to one's mental whims and desires. In normal life, one finds it difficult to surrender to something that is different. It is even difficult to surrender to God or guru. If one tries, certain thoughts come, certain influences affect one's beliefs, doubt creeps in, questioning begins and one again falls prey to mental influences. Christ's disciples had to face doubts. Spiritual aspirants who are trying to follow a spiritual lifestyle have to face those confusions and doubts, as surrender is never complete in our lives.

Surrender simply means not being a slave to mental whims, fantasies and desires. Presently, aspirants have surrendered to their mind. The mind says, "Do this." They do it. The mind says, "Say this." They say it. The mind says, "Desire this." They desire it. The mind says, "Reject that." They reject it. They have become slaves of the mind. The real meaning of surrender is coming out of this situation and surrendering to the cosmic, divine nature, becoming master of the mind and tuning oneself with the higher Self. This surrender is the first step of Ishwara pranidhana: 'Let Thy will be done'. It is also a philosophy, a concept, an idea that one tries to develop. One who can develop this philosophy and live accordingly, who can cultivate that spiritual strength and energy within, is recognized as a disciple and eventually, in the course of time, as an enlightened being.

The highest spiritual value to be cultivated in life is Ishwara pranidhana. The moment one lives that, one's yoga also reaches its point of culmination. Ishwara pranidhana is identifying with the pure inner nature. Once one has identified with the inner nature, one has attained Ishwara pranidhana, and one does not remain oneself. That is the turning point in the aspirant's life.

How is God's will expressed in helping others?

Swami Satyananda: The attitude should not be one of charity. The feeling has to be spontaneously spiritual, not intellectually spiritual. If a person's brother or sister, wife or child, father or mother is sick, he gives them love and support, not charity. He does his duty towards them because he feels one with them. There is a feeling of unity on an emotional plane or a spiritual plane.

The level at which this unity is felt depends on one's evolution. One may feel emotional or spiritual unity. What does the term 'spiritual union' mean? Does it mean physical, mental, emotional or psychic union? What it means depends on one's personal evolution. It is really God who helps people. If somebody has to be helped somewhere in any part of the world, it is He who is helping – I am only the medium.

How is the attitude of total dedication to the Divine developed?

Swami Satyananda: During my early years, there was no idea in my mind about teaching yoga, forming ashrams, making disciples, touring the world and establishing centres. I was the type of person who preferred to go into seclusion for years, for I didn't want to think at all, but the divine had willed something else. I never wanted an ashram, but I had to build ashrams. I never wanted any dealings with money or people, but I had to deal with money and people. I never believed that man could evolve through any practice. I never believed that man had to do anything for his spiritual evolution. God has given him birth, so it is His duty to look after him. If a person is wretched, a criminal or a saint, it is because God has made him that. A great Indian bhakta has written:

All is Thy will.
Thy will be done.
Whether You raise me
To the height of spiritual glory,

Or You throw me down
Into the abyss of hell,
I accept it,
Readily, happily, with pleasure,
Because that is Thy will.
I am the chariot,
You are the charioteer.
I am the horse,
You are the master
Keep me as You like.
Use me, misuse me or abuse me,
I have nothing to defend.

This is the attitude of total dedication. Man only needs to surrender himself to God's will, nothing else. But how difficult it is to remain completely at His will! When there are losses and failures, there are complaints. Where is the submission then? When life becomes dedicated and everything is surrendered, placed completely at the disposal of that supreme will, one must be prepared to live calmly and quietly under any circumstances. Even if one's husband or wife leaves, it is accepted as divine will. When the scales are heavily loaded against one, consider the situation as a gift from Him. Everything, not only the valuables, pleasures and comforts, but also the difficulties, humiliations and hardships should be considered as gifts, an expression of His will. This is the fundamental faith that is lacking in spiritual life today.

Most of what is said about God is just intellectual gymnastics. People quote from books, but the mind is not impressed. They say, "My Lord, I am always dying for You. Thy will be done, but please bring back my husband." What is this business of trying to surrender everything to Him, but keeping a straw for oneself and then suffering because of it?

Bhakti is total dedication to God, to the divine will, the cosmic or universal process, of which one is a tiny part. One is nothing; one is smaller than a molecule or an atom, a tiny cog in that untold universal process. Things are moving

along in the history and geography of divinity. A person has to be tossed this way or that way and if he does not accept it, he will always be unhappy.

Karmas can be exhausted by offering them to God, and before doing a deed, realizing that the doer is someone else. One is only an instrument, the medium to carry out the action. Take everything in life – the state of spiritual evolution and the state of mental or moral degeneration, prosperity, poverty, calamity and happiness – as the will of God. The bhakta does not wish for what is good nor does he hate anything bad that comes along. That is the attitude of bhaktas.

How can one become an instrument of the divine will?

Swami Sivananda: Everyone is under the will of God. There is no one who is not governed by His will. To become an instrument of the divine will, choose nothing, but rejoice in the station or the work allotted by God. It is not what one chooses but what He does that is best. Complete surrender to God is the foundation of everlasting peace.

Simply saying, “I am Thine, O Lord” without real inner feeling will not constitute integral self-surrender. It should come from the core of one’s heart. One must be prepared for a radical change without sticking to old habits, ways and motives, without expecting everything to happen the way one wants. The bhakta lives to carry out the divine purpose and does not think of those ambitions which the mind likes to gratify. The bhakta does not think of using even the divine grace or the divine force for his own purpose. The irrepressible ego will assert itself in various ways and refuse to give up its old habits and ways. It will try to get everything from the Divine and totally decline to give itself to the Divine. That is the reason why aspirants do not make any substantial progress on the spiritual path even after doing sadhana for many years.

The first stage of self-surrender is only a firm resolve to surrender to God or the preceptor. A sadhaka who has

dedicated his life to serving his teacher or humanity, or to attaining self-realization is not at all bound by the actions he performs, subsequent to his self-surrender. Self-surrender becomes perfect only after God-realization.

Give up the expectation of fruits and the idea of agency, the feeling of 'I am the doer', 'I am the enjoyer'. The bhakta feels like an instrument in the hands of God who works through him. The bhakta feels that this world is a manifestation of the Divine and the children, wife, father, mother are the images or children of the Divine. The bhakta sees God in every face and in every object and always has a cool, balanced mind. If this changed angle of vision and divine bhava is developed in daily life by protracted and constant practice, actions will become yogic activities. They will become worship of the Divine. This is dynamic yoga and powerful sadhana.

How can one experience freedom while surrendering to the Divine?

Swami Niranjanananda: Freedom, as a concept, can be viewed from different angles. There are people who have spiritual inclinations, who believe one is bound by this world, by this body and mind, and that in order to attain realization one has to become free from the bondage of the senses, mind, emotions. That is one vision of freedom people pursue.

Another perspective on freedom is to be free from rules and regulations, to rebel against the set norms of society, and to want to do things that are not commonly done. That gives a feeling of power and control, a feeling that one is doing something greater than what is expected by society.

Commonsense and the yogic perspective should enable us to understand that there are limitations and restrictions imposed upon everything in this creation. The senses have limitations, the mind has limitations, feelings have limitations, even concepts are limited, and the laws created by human society are also limited. Therefore, rather than thinking of freedom, one should think about one's

responsibilities. Just as a part of each individual seeks freedom, there is a part within that seeks the fulfilment of responsibilities. If one connects with responsibility, freedom comes naturally. There is no freedom in the idea of 'freedom'; however, there is freedom in responsibility.

From the yogic perspective, there are four responsibilities: *artha*, *kama*, *dharma* and *moksha*. People are responsible for their own emancipation, and the effort they make is the effort of *moksha*. That is the responsibility that goes with the desire for *moksha*, liberation. They are responsible for the growth of their nature and personality, for developing the beauty inherent within them, and for becoming better human beings. These are the responsibilities of *dharma*, appropriate living. Similarly, there are the responsibilities of *kama*, emotional fulfilment, and *artha*, material fulfilment.

Looking at the positive, constructive and creative side of these four responsibilities, it is possible to become free from the bondage that is self-created, and which inhibits and restricts the expressions of the mind and senses. This is where *viveka*, discrimination, plays an important role. When dealing with the responsibilities of *kama*, how does one know which desire is appropriate and uplifting, and which is inappropriate and will push one further into obsessions and darkness? Here *viveka buddhi*, or the discriminative ability, plays a major role in deciding in which direction one needs to go.

In reality there are only two directions in life. One is known as *pravritti* and the other *nivritti*. *Pravritti* means 'subject to the world' and *nivritti* means 'subject to the divine will'. When one is walking the path of *pravritti*, one is subject to the world. Here, the nature of the mind and senses is guided and coloured by gross and material aspirations. That is when one feels bondage, when one is not able to connect with the positive 'self'. One feels restricted in one's expressions and that something is lacking in one's life. One feels motivation, yet is unable to fulfil that motivation. This

happens when there is association with the pravritti path, the gross, the material, the sensorial.

The second path is the nivritti path, where one subjects oneself to the divine will. That divine will is not the will of the senses, mind or emotions; rather, it is the will that comes up spontaneously from the depth of one's being, and with it, one connects.

When one is connecting with the higher will, God's will or the cosmic will, inspiration and faith makes one free from the limitations imposed at the time when the senses and personality are directed out into the realm of the material world. Therefore, rather than craving for freedom, one should be aware of the responsibilities towards oneself and towards one's own growth. Just as there are social responsibilities, communal responsibilities and personal responsibilities, connecting with the responsibilities that belong to the realm of moksha and dharma will make one free.

What is your relationship with God?

Swami Satyananda: This has been one of the basic questions in my life. After coming to Rikhia, I was enlightened and discovered my relationship with God, but for fifty to sixty years I did not know it. There is a bhajan by Mirabai:

Please keep me as your servant.
If I live as your servant,
I will plant trees in your garden
And get a chance to have your darshan every day.
In the streets of Vrindavan I shall sing your glories.
Please keep me as your servant.

I am a loner, a recluse, but I have noticed one predominant principle in my life. I am a vehicle, a chariot, and God is the charioteer. I am a machine and he is the machine operator. God resides within me and works through me in such a way that I do what is called social service. God may choose to make me work for myself, for my own selfish purpose wherein

no benefit accrues to others through me. If so, even that is fine. After all, am I free? Am I self-willed? He created me and I was born. I had no plan of my own. Neither my father nor my mother had a plan. I do not move by my own choice. I may claim that I do this or that, but it is only my ego that speaks thus. *Ishvaro aham* – “I am God.” *Bhogi siddho aham balvan* – “I am the enjoyer and I am strong.” If I spoke like this, and I might have, that was only my ignorance speaking.

The jnani speaks the language of a bhakta. He says, “Thy will be done.” The world says, “I am doing it,” but the jnani says, “God makes me do everything.” If He leads me to hell or to knowledge of Brahman, it is fine, because I am not free. I have no will of my own. O God, when you gave me good sense, I did a lot of good work. When you gave me vice, I abducted Sita. When you inspired me to take sannyasa, I took sannyasa. When you prompted me to give up sannyasa, I gave up sannyasa. I am not at all free. Is anyone free? In fact, who is free in this creation? People consider themselves to be free, but they are not.

There were so many events in my life where I always thought I was the doer, the main entity, that it was all my doing. After fifty to sixty years, towards the fag end of my life, I have realized that God is the doer and whatever has happened in my life is all due to Him. He made me do everything. What a fool I was! Had I known earlier that He was making me do it all, at least I would have enjoyed all those years.

The pursuits of my spiritual life are fulfilled and I do not require anything now. All is bliss – give me Your darshan if You will, otherwise I do not deserve it; for it is Your will that prevails. I am only Your servant and a servant has no choice. What choice does a servant have?

How does one find the right duty or the will of God?

Swami Niranjanananda: If an aspirant is to live according to the will of God, then first of all the attitudes need to change. Without that effort, one cannot live according to the will of

God. The change takes place in the ideology of the mind. People think, “I am the doer” – *Aham karta*, and that they can do things to influence their situation, environment and society. They have inflated ideas about themselves, especially when they are young and hot-blooded. In everyday situations, they become the actors identifying with the act. When they identify with the act, they experience every thought, emotion and feeling that appears in that act. “I am the doer, I am the enjoyer” – *Aham karta, aham bhokta*. If they think they can set things right, they are following the dictates of their mind, not God.

In order to recognize the will of God, this attitude has to change to *Naham karta* – “I am not the doer,” *Naham bhokta* – “I am not the enjoyer.” It is said, “Make me an instrument of Thy will” – to become an instrument so that the divine will can then take over one’s life. To become that instrument, one has to work hard. In order to become the conveyor of God’s will, the attitude of ‘I am the doer, I am the performer, I am the enjoyer’ has to change. One has to become empty. The character, lifestyle, attitude, belief and strength of those who have followed that will are defined by this change of attitude: letting go of the individual identity and merging with the cosmic identity. However, in the absence of the ability to let go of the idea of identity, one can imbibe and follow the teachings of those who have followed the divine will. The basis of any such teaching is finding what is appropriate in life.

True religious or spiritual teachings, without any social impositions, give the understanding of appropriate behaviour, function, performance and thought patterns that uplift, unite one with other people and bring out one’s human qualities. Being without social impositions means connecting with the true spiritual component. The problem arises when different social conditions begin to influence one’s spiritual ideas.

People are all subject to social conditionings. The software that their mind contains and which are born with is

not made by them, but by the higher intelligence. Throughout life, they function according to the programming of that software. The commands of the software are known as *chitta vrittis*. People are living that programming and cannot change it unless they become programmers themselves and know the programming language. Therefore, what do they do? They just try to understand life by incorporating the good and the beautiful that life has to offer. When they are able to do this, they are adhering to the path of dharma by putting into their life components of goodness, and an illuminated attitude and behaviour.

What is meant by ‘being one with God’?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the transcendental state of being, everything becomes the will of God, an expression of the will of God, whether the greenery in the leaves, the coolness of the wind, the softness of the grass or the warmth of the sun. In the transcendental state, all this is perceived as an emanation of God, God’s *shakti* or the creative nature of God. God pervades the entire creation.

If ten cups are placed upside down on a table, the cups will not create a change in the quality of air or space inside them. They will become a barrier, yet the space and air inside will be the same as the space and air outside. Similarly, whether it is God manifesting as the self in a container, in the life of each human being, or God is manifesting in his transcendental nature, as the container of everything, there is no difference. To the uninitiated, that state is defined as ‘following the will of God’, but for the aspirant who is experiencing the enlightened being, that state is being one with God. That is union.

If you and your God are two separate things, that is duality. It implies an ego identification. The person who has attained the state of union has merged with God. A statement such as, ‘my Father and I are one’ means that there is no duality. Every potential and quality, the entire nature of the son is in the Father and of the Father is in the son. They

are one mind and spirit. Similarly, Sri Krishna's declaration, "I am God. Everything comes back to Me" is the statement of a person who is living that realization every moment.

There is only one God. There is no cosmic Father and no cosmic Mother; God is God. It is irrelevant to ask, "How does one experience God in the male form or the female form?" God comes in the most cherished form, that is all. If one's cherished form is a male figure, God will appear as a male figure. If one's desired form is a female figure, God will appear as a female figure. God may appear in the form of a child, master or friend. God can appear in any form which one holds inside. If that image is of the Mother, God's form will be Mother. If the image is of the Father, God's form will be Father. Just as clay has no shape, yet is shaped by the sculptor's hands and imagination, God has no shape; it is human belief and faith which shape forms of God.

RAJA AMBARISH

Raja Ambarish ruled over the whole world and had an inexhaustible store of wealth. His good fortune was not found anywhere else. When a poor person turns to renunciation due to a paucity of means, it is not so unusual. It is only a great person who develops vairagya when he is surrounded by plenty and prosperity. This, however, is only possible through the grace of God.

The bhaktas of Vasudeva regard the world as a pile of rubble. Raja Ambarish looked upon his wealth and fortune as unreal and a dream. He was aware that one can get attached to wealth and lose one's intelligence in the process. Totally unattached to the world and its pleasures, Raja Ambarish lived his life dedicated to the service and remembrance of the Divine. His mind was engaged in the contemplation of God, his speech extolled the virtues of the Divine, his hands were busy cleaning and caring for God's temple, his ears always listened

only to stories of God's nature, his eyes only sought the darshan of God's image. His entire body was totally absorbed in the Divine. He accepted everything as divine prasada. Offering his actions to God and seeing the Divine as enshrined in all beings, Raja Ambarish ruled according to the laws prescribed in the scriptures and upheld dharma.

Raja Ambarish's ministers and the people of his kingdom spent their time listening to the stories of the Divine and singing His praise. When God saw how the people were always engaged in these activities of devotion, he decided to appoint his Sudarshan chakra as the security caretaker of the kingdom. The chakra was installed at the gates of Raja Ambarish's palace and became the kingdom's protection.

Once, Raja Ambarish and his queen performed a year-long anushthana dedicated to Sri Krishna. On the concluding day, they worshipped Him with great pomp and splendour. Many Brahmins received gifts of cows. As the day drew to its close, Rishi Durvasa and his students arrived at the palace. Raja Ambarish greeted them with due honour and respect and invited them to have a meal. Rishi Durvasa accepted and went to the river for his bath before sitting down to the meal. There was just one hour left for the auspicious period and if the anushthana was not concluded within that time, the entire year-long anushthana would be undone.

Not knowing how long Rishi Durvasa would take to return, Raja Ambarish was in a quandary as partaking of the meal before his guests was against the rules of etiquette. With the permission of the Brahmins, the king concluded the proceedings of the anushthana and waited for Rishi Durvasa to return. When he did come back after his bath, Rishi Durvasa became furious that the anushthana had been brought to its conclusion before he could take his meal. In his fury, he created Kritya, a demoness, from a single hair of his matted locks. She rushed towards the king with a sword in her hand. Raja Ambarish was completely calm and stood before her without

any fear. The Sudarshan chakra spun through the air and came to his aid, killing the demoness in a trice and then set off after Rishi Durvasa next. Rishi Durvasa ran for his life, yet no matter where he fled, into the mountains, to caves or under the oceans, the Sudarshan chakra would catch up with him. Indra and the other gods could not save him and even Brahma and Shiva declined to give him shelter.

Finally Shiva advised him to seek refuge in the protection of Vishnu. Durvasa ran to Vaikuntha and fell at Vishnu's feet. He prayed fervently, "Please forgive me for my unjust behaviour towards your devotee, Raja Ambarish. I beg for your protection." The Lord was tolerant of any attacks made on Himself, but if His devotee was slighted that was unpardonable in His eyes. "I do not function independently of my devotees. I am part and parcel of them and both of us are dedicated to each other. How can I let down those who are dear to me and always engaged in my service? You must ask Raja Ambarish for forgiveness. Then you will find peace."

In the meantime, Raja Ambarish had been worried about Rishi Durvasa who had to flee for his life without even taking his meal. He felt it was unfair to eat and so he waited for one whole year for Rishi Durvasa only sipping water. When Rishi Durvasa returned to the palace, he fell at Raja Ambarish's feet begging for forgiveness. The king was deeply embarrassed and calmed the Sudarshan chakra by singing its praises, thus saving Rishi Durvasa's life. The fiery heat from the chakra cooled down and the rishi finally felt some relief. He declared that he had witnessed the power and importance of the servants of the Divine.

Rishi Durvasa was touched that despite his insults and threats to the king, Raja Ambarish only had his welfare at heart. He proclaimed that Raja Ambarish was a living embodiment of divine mercy and was surely one of the foremost devotees of God. Taking no pride in the Rishi's praises, the Raja humbly accepted it as divine grace. He bowed down to Rishi Durvasa and respectfully invited him to sit down for a meal. It was only

after he had served the rishi that he finally ate something – after one whole year.

When his long and peaceful rule came to an end, Raja Ambarish left for the forests and spent his time meditating upon the Divine in isolation. Finally leaving his physical body, he attained peace at the feet of the Lord and became one with Him.

EXPRESSING GOD'S WILL

Is it easy to surrender?

Swami Satyananda: Everybody should have some strict principle in his life. Devotees must say, 'No, I surrender to God. Let His will be done'. Then they must practise it from moment to moment. They might fail. I have failed a number of times. It is not possible to be one hundred percent true to one's convictions and I am aware of it, but still I should practise it, because I know that the trial will come. At that time I must try my best to practise it at every moment. Even though I do not know the will of God, I surrender, I resign, I let it be, that is all. Everything that happens is the will of God.

What are some guidelines to live one's dharma?

Swami Satyananda: The indications of dharma are enumerated in the *Mahabharata*. There are ten characteristics of dharma, the codes of conduct that should be followed:

Steadiness, forgiveness, self-restraint, non-stealing, purity, sensory control, intellect, learning, truthfulness and absence of anger.

Every now and then one has a dilemma in life about what is dharma and what is adharma. What can one do until one realizes a stage of discrimination? When there is confusion about right and wrong, one should go to the guru. If one

has no guru, one should assist the helpless and practise compassion. Then the heart will be clean, the atma will be clean and one will be able to decide what dharma and adharmas are. These are the two ways.

It is not enough to believe in the will of God; one has to follow God's rules as well. In the language of the shastras, these rules are known as dharma and adharmas. *Dharma* means actions that are right, proper and necessary. *Adharma* means actions that are not right and should not be done. If a farmer sows wheat seeds in properly prepared beds, but fills the beds up with too much water, that would be an adharmic act. Here the term adharmas means that which is incorrect, improper or wrong. Overwatering is actually good for rice but not for wheat. Similarly, if he cultivates paddy fields but leaves them without water, they will dry up. This, too, would be adharmas.

The natural law that is an integral part of each being becomes the will of God. When God created human beings, He gave them the sense of *viveka*, or discrimination, to evaluate right and wrong, good and bad. However, *viveka* is there only in seed form; human beings have to cultivate and nurture it. When man obeys the will of God, he flourishes and evolves, because while obeying the will of God he uses his intelligence, his *viveka*, and follows God's rules. Everything that is created in this universe: earth, water, fire, air, ether, minerals, vegetation, insects, birds, animals and humans, all develop or become retarded, thrive or perish, according to the will of God, within the governance of God's laws.

What happens when a bhakta surrenders to God's will?

Swami Sivananda: Whatever the devotee does is for the sake of the Divine. He does not expect any reward for his actions. Further, he has no attachment to either karma or its fruits. This is said in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutra 48):

*Yah karmaphalam tyajati karmaani sannasyati tato
nirdvandvo bhavati.*

He who renounces the fruits of his actions and who renounces all actions goes beyond the pairs of opposites (such as pleasure and pain, good and bad, heat and cold).

When the devotee feels that he is an instrument in the hands of God, he renounces doership and agency. When the devotee surrenders himself totally, God destroys his ego and begins to act through him. Now the devotee is freed from the pairs of opposites.

‘All actions’ here means selfish actions, *kamyā karma*. One should renounce selfish actions. Life is not possible without some kind of activity. Selfless activities must be continued.

When devotees dedicate the fruits of their actions and the actions themselves to the Divine they are freed from the effects of virtuous and vicious deeds. They are not affected in the least by pleasure and pain resulting from the gain or loss of the result of actions. Such devotees are beyond the effects of the *gunas*. They are ever immersed in remembrance of God. Selfish actions have no attraction for them.

The world is not this wall or a stone or a tree. The world is a play kept up by these pairs of opposites which affect the mind through the two mental currents of *raga* and *dvesha*, attraction and repulsion or likes and dislikes. One who conquers these pairs of opposites really conquers the whole world. Heat and cold affect the body, and pleasure and pain affect the mind. One who transcends the pairs of opposites, or *dvandvas*, always keeps a balanced mind. This is an important sign of a *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated in the body.

What does it mean to be an instrument of God?

Swami Niranjanananda: The prayer by Saint Francis of Assisi, “Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace,” is not only a prayer. It can become a reality, although maybe not specifically in relation to peace. There are many things for which God can make one an instrument. Peace is only one thing. Maybe God can express wisdom or a particular quality through someone.

Maybe He can express compassion and love, or a way of life through someone, or even a change in the social or financial structure of a nation. Being in tune with God not only peace or love will be expressed. There are a million and one things that can be expressed by God, according to the need of society, the individual, the nation and the world.

Sometimes God may give a book, sometimes a teaching, sometimes a message, a reform or a drastic and dramatic change. What the will of God is, nobody knows. One should not think that peace or compassion are the only expressions of a godly nature.

What is your experience of surrendering to God's will?

Swami Satyananda: Anyone can become an instrument, so I prefer to become an instrument. If one is to become God's instrument, then one has to make oneself empty, so that He can play. Otherwise it is not possible. So if I have to become an instrument, then I have to be completely different. Whatever happens to me, let it happen. Even if I had cancer I would not fight, I would accept it, because, for me, the choice is grace. I have to make a choice between grace and health. Therefore, I have always had very good health. It is difficult to surrender to God. It is a technique, it is a difficult technique and it is always in my mind for the more I can illuminate myself, the more the grace will flow and the little 'I' must go. Then the big 'I' will dwell in me.

Many times I am not able to see the way. I understand it; on the mental plane I am clear. However, it is not a mental business, it is experience. Prostration is not surrender. I should not imagine that I am a lotus; I have to become a lotus. I should not imagine that I surrender, but I should know how to surrender.

What does it mean to be a servant of God?

Swami Satyananda: I am God's servant. He made me leave my family, hearth and home, although I did not know that He was making me do it. I thought I was leaving because

I had developed vairagya, or because I wanted to awaken kundalini, or because I wanted to realize the atma or paramatma. I attributed everything to myself. He sent me to a true guru, a *sadguru*. I thought it was good luck. I did not know that He was doing it; I thought I was doing it. Then He asked me to live in Rishikesh. Rishikesh was my dream. I thought that it was I who had made it. It is not out of ego that I say this. For years, day and night, I worked to build up the ashram there, but He asked me to leave. I left Rishikesh, but I did not know that I was following God's order. I thought that perhaps my guru was sending me for a greater mission. What ignorance, arrogance, maya! But I obeyed. I was not a disobedient servant, but I was an ignorant and reluctant one. Tulsidas has described this beautifully in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Balakanda, after doha 27, chau 6, and doha 28):

*Reejhata raama saneha nisote,
Ko jaga manda malinamati mote.*

*Satha sevaka kee preeti ruchi rakhihahi raama kripaalu.
Upala kie jalajaana jehi sachiva sumati kapi bhaalu.
Hauhu kahaavata sabu kahata raama sahata upahaasa.
Saahiba seetaanaatha so sevaka tulaseedaasa.*

Rama is pleased only with devotion –
Otherwise who is more foolish and
Fickle-minded than me in the world?

Kind Rama will keep in mind
The love and interest of even the wicked servant,
He, by whose grace stones behaved like boats
And foolish monkeys and bears became advisors.
Seeing a servant like Tulsidas
And a master like Rama, the husband of Sita,
People laugh, but it is Sri Rama who has to bear this.

God made me take sannyasa, though I was against it. On 8th September, my sannyasa diksha was decided. My name was

on the list, but I refused. It was the year of the partition of India, I had recently returned from Pakistan and my mind was reacting, revolting strongly. I thought that spirituality was nonsense, that there was no truth in God or in the scriptures. I told Swami Sivananda that I would not take sannyasa, and I did not. I thought that I would go and find a job. On 9th September, Swamiji told me that I had great potential which would become dissipated if I were to become involved with wife and children. On 12th, he called me and I took sannyasa. I thought, "Okay, I will take it." Now I know that He forced me to take sannyasa.

I have always received clear instructions. The first instruction was about Australia. He said they were good people who needed yoga and would propagate yoga, and that is why I had great success in Australia. Then came Denmark, Sweden, Italy and Greece. I had clear instructions throughout. Everywhere I went I received guidance, but I thought it was my inner being who was speaking, my supersoul. Who is my supersoul? There is no supersoul! God is the first and the last. There is no supermind, no supernatural consciousness. They are people's interpretations and definitions, words and lamentations. Everything is God, whom I have not seen or perhaps will not even see in the future. An Urdu poet has said:

None has come, none will come.

But what else to do, except wait?

I dreamed of Ganga Darshan, the ashram in Munger, and drew up the plans from my dream. The plans were ready well before it was built. Somewhere, much before, it was built in space. First, things are built in space and time, then they become a manifest reality. That is how Ganga Darshan was built. On these occasions He made me do the work that He wanted me to do and I never realized it. I always felt that I was doing it myself, by my own wish.

When God asked me to leave Munger, I left. Why did I leave? I thought, now this institution is too much for me,

because I had made a promise. When I was in seclusion in Tryambakeshwar in 1989, after leaving Ganga Darshan, it became clear to me that I am nothing and He is everything. Whatever He asks me to do, I will do. It is not my mind which speaks; it is not my life which lives. It is He who speaks, who thinks and lives.

In Tryambakeshwar I heard God's command to go to Rikhia in the depth of my consciousness, beyond the mind. Tryambakeshwar is the source of the river Godavari, where there is one of the twelve jyotirlingam of Shiva. I had a small hut and I was completely free from all responsibilities. I asked, "What am I to do now? I have nothing more to do with yoga, with preaching, or with anything else. I am a sanniyasin, a free bird. I have no more missions to perform."

I am the bird of the vast expanse of the sky,
I am the continuous flow of nectar,
I am completely quiet, blissful and eternal,
I am a luminous star of bliss.

There have been many instances which I attributed to my higher mind, but now I do not make that mistake. It is God who guides me. He has guided me from childhood. Now I am old so I have retired and come to Rikhia, where I have found much peace. Here my eyes have opened further because this is a great and powerful place. God showed me this place. He told me to come here. He told me to do *panchagni*, the sacrifice of the five fires, and at the end He said, "Love your neighbours as I have loved you, provide them with the same facilities which I have provided for you."

When Sri Aurobindo left Aligarh Jail, he went to Chandornagore a French enclave, to avoid the police. Then he came to Rikhia because his wife was living with her children in this village, but he had to leave for Pondicherry to avoid the British police. For Aurobindo this was only a hiding place. He could not establish his ashram here because it was in my destiny, it is my lot. What games God plays! There is a poem by Rabindranath Tagore:

O worshipper,
Put aside singing the name,
Leave worship, artifice and prayer.
Why are you sitting in a corner,
Closing the doors of the temple,
Hiding in the darkness of your mind?
In what kind of worship are you engaged?
Open your eyes and see,
Your deity is not in the temple.
His abode has shifted to that place
Where the farmer is ploughing the field,
Turning the hard soil, making it soft,
Where the labourer is making a road
After breaking the stone with great toil.
Scorched by sun or drenched by rain,
In summer and rainy season alike,
Their hands are smeared with soil.
If you go to them, leave your beautiful dress
And go walking along the dirt path.
Your deity is not in the temple.

So whether or not I have seen God is immaterial. I do not crave to see Him because I know that all forms are His form and, at the same time, He has no form. Similarly, Kabir has said:

How can I describe the beauty of love,
When I am completely merged in its splendour?
The dye in which I have been coloured
And the grace which I have experienced
Have intoxicated me so that I forget
Everything, including my body and mind.

Now, when the shadows of my life are becoming longer, I realize that whatever has happened was His will. I am thankful to Him for giving me more than I deserved and more than I expected, although, of course, I did not pray for any of it. At the end of my life, I have realized that I did

not do anything on my own. It has all been done by Him. My successes are His. He inspired me to accomplish such incredible work. It seems like a dream. I have never faced failure. My health, clear mind and happy life are all His. My efforts were done by Him. He bestowed on me the art of living and the power of thinking. Today, I accept the fact that although I was an undeserving person earlier, now I have become deserving.



6

A New Way of Life

You do not have to create the compartments of wordly and spiritual. Whenever you have time, merge yourself in the remembrance of the Divine, introvert your tendencies, peep within and experience joy. Then share your happiness with everyone.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

A BHAKTA'S LIFESTYLE

What is the true meaning of bhakti?

Swami Niranjanananda: People believe that bhakti is a sadhana through which God, the transcendental power, may be realized. They believe that it is a technique by which closeness to God may be achieved, a method by which one can know the God within. There are many beliefs about bhakti; however, bhakti is a lifestyle, an art of living and nothing else.

How did bhakti yoga become a lifestyle?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhakti is not a philosophy, not a religion, not devotion; it is a way of life. The concept of bhakti yoga started as a way of life, not as a way of devotion. According to the Indian system, time is classified in four ages: Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwarpa Yuga and Kali Yuga, the present age.

From ancient records, scriptures and the history of the world, it is clear that most of the religions have come about during the time of Kali Yuga. In the other three ages there were no religions, instead only one religion – the Bhagavat religion or dharma. *Bhagavat* means ‘god’, so it was the religion of god. The idea was that an individual who has taken birth has to connect with the higher, the supreme, the transcendental nature. The human being is finite and the transcendental nature is infinite.

God was in his transcendental form as G-O-D, having the quality of generation, organization and destruction. Connecting with this power, this force is the aim of bhakti yoga. The desire, the drive to know where one is connected is the desire to know oneself, the transcendental nature and God.

One realizes one’s inner nature or transcendental nature when one is able to maintain equipoise, serenity and peace within. When there is distraction and dissipation, there is no awareness, no focus, no attention, but with awareness and focus, realization can take place effortlessly. Therefore, to maintain equilibrium in life became the basic teaching of bhakti yoga.

Whether the text on bhakti and bhakti yoga was written by Sri Krishna, Narada and Sandilya or others, only a few concepts were given. First, to have faith in God, *Ishwara pranidhana*; second, to maintain inner purity, *atmashuddhi*; and third, to be equipoised when confronting the opposites or duality in life. These three concepts were the main ideas for bhakti yoga to become a lifestyle.

How should the bhakta approach his work and duty?

Swami Sivananda: For the realized devotee the distinction between sacred and secular duty vanishes. For him, every work is a sacred offering unto the Lord. Every work is an expression of this love for God. A worldly-minded person cannot work without the expectation of fruits. He is caught up in the never-ending wheel of samsara. The rishis, seers

and the Vedas, advise that all work should be consecrated to the Lord and performed without any expectation of fruits. Then the heart is purified and bhakti develops.

What is the advice given by the scriptures to bhaktas?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhakti can be attained through the right conditions in life, rather than through structured sadhana. By cultivating discipline and order in life, bhakti develops. The effort in bhakti yoga is to be alert and aware of one's character and behaviour, and develop excellence in thought, feeling and action by nurturing the sattwic, creative, positive nature. Bhakti will be realized when the attempt is made to eradicate the negativity, cunning and deception from one's life and mind. If the mind and emotions can be fine-tuned, there is no need to sit with the eyes closed in front of a statue of God. If one can make the mind and heart sensitive and connect them to the positive, uplifting, creative qualities and traits, then that is bhakti.

The scriptures say: *Shraddhaya satyamapyate* – “Truth can be attained through faith.” In other words, bhakti can be attained through faith. It is said in the *Rig Veda*: *Shraddhe shraddhapayeha nah* – “Mother Shraddha! Make my heart your abode.” According to the *Rig Veda*, one should first invoke *shraddha* or faith, then practise satsang. *Satsang* means keeping the company of a person who is generous, pure, without fault, discriminating, thoughtful and wise. If an ordinary piece of wood is kept with a piece of sandalwood, after a period of time the ordinary piece of wood will take on the fragrance of sandalwood. This is the effect of keeping good company.

The *Rig Veda* further states that there should not be any ill-will towards anybody. The *Shukla Yajur Veda* says: *Mitrasyaham chakshusha sarvani bhootani samikshe* – “I am benevolent, looking at all creatures with a loving gaze. There is no trace of hostility or ill-will towards anyone. My sight is benevolent and loving towards all.” This is the mental and psychological attitude of goodwill.

To do good to all beings according to one's capacity is bhakti. The *Atharva Veda* says: *Shatahasta samahara, sahastrahasta sankira* – “Gather wealth and gold with the enthusiasm and effort of a hundred hands and distribute with a thousand hands.” Take with a hundred hands and give with a thousand hands is the rule of bhakti. Without generosity and a giving, charitable nature, one cannot perfect bhakti. People have been ringing bells and doing japa for a thousand years, yet has anyone actually experienced bhakti? People confine their bhakti to the four walls of the temple; they do not practise it as a lifestyle, as a condition of their life. When bhakti becomes a lifestyle, the behaviour and interactions are full of bhakti. It is only when all interactions are full of bhakti that one is uplifted.

The *Rig Veda* says: *Madhviringavo bhavantu nah* – “There should always be restraint in life. May no unbalanced, indiscriminating act happen through me. May there always be restraint in life.” The yoga texts say that in order to practise restraint, there must be awareness. One must meditate, become a witness of one's thoughts and the master and director of one's actions.

Why is it important to introduce chanting in one's family life?

Swami Satyananda: The *Ramacharitamanas* is an excellent text. It should be taught from childhood. In all households, the recitation or *path* of the *Ramacharitamanas* should be organized and the members of the family should sit and listen to it. If one alone reads it, it is not going to be beneficial. All day long one has negative thoughts; if one invests five minutes in God, how can it be harmful? The whole essence of spiritual life is in devotion to God

Ritual sacrifice of animals and performance of poojas to awaken the gods and goddesses has its own place, but that is not spirituality. It is superstition. The meaning of *bhakti*, devotion or spirituality, is to love God, to have a relationship with Him.

How does kirtan express the qualities of vandana?

Swami Sivananda: Singing about the Lord is usually known as bhajan in most parts of India. In sankirtan people join together and sing God's name collectively in a common place with accompaniment of musical instruments such as harmonium, violin, cymbals, mridanga or drum. Christians sing hymns in the churches with piano. This is also sankirtan.

The Sanskrit verb *krit* means 'praising'. From this is derived kirtan. Saint Tukaram of Maharashtra in one of his songs has charmingly said that as the purifying waters of the Ganga have come down to the mortal world from the Lord's feet, so the flow of kirtan comes out of the hearts of mortals and reaches the Lord's feet.

Kirtan is an easy way for attaining God-consciousness. At night the members of the house should sit in a circle and do kirtan for one hour before the picture of Sri Krishna. The servants of the house should be included and sing any name of the Lord such as *Shiva, Hare Rama, Sita Ram* in a chorus with one tune and beat harmoniously. Just as the intoxication that one gets by taking a dose of opium lasts for some hours, the divine intoxication that one gets from kirtan will last for some hours during the following day. At night one will be free from bad dreams. During kirtan a special spiritual power comes from the Indweller of your heart and purifies the mind and heart. Sattwa flows from the Lord to the mind just as oil flows from one vessel to another vessel. Kirtan gives strength to face the difficulties in the battle of life. Singing the names of the Lord is a mental tonic.

What will the practice of kirtan achieve for the family?

Swami Satyananda: Every other form of yoga if practised incorrectly has some side effects, but when a person practises kirtan for four hours at a stretch there are no side effects.

Once a week, fortnight or month the members of a family must sit together and sing simple kirtans of God's name, such as: *Hare Rama Hare Krishna, Sri Rama Jaya Rama* and *Om*

Namah Shivaya. In this age of adharmā – tension, confusion, passion, greed, depression, blood pressure and diabetes, there is no other way except God's name. The kirtan singing will improve the quality of one's family life and people should be properly trained in kirtan as it is so useful for humanity. Just as the interior decor improves the quality of any room, God's name improves the quality of one's mind, relationships and the atmosphere in the home.

Bhakti yoga is a good way of life not only for the individual but also for society and the entire civilization. Imagine a family sitting together every evening with a harmonium, guitar or sitar and singing *Sriman Narayana Narayana Narayana Om*, or any other kirtan. After singing they can read some books on saints and mystics. This is a happy family, for kirtan cheers them up and gives them a feeling of love, satisfaction, harmony and bliss.

If you start kirtan in your own home, the most enthusiastic members will be the children. They will forget the TV and video. Children enjoy kirtan so much that they forget about everything else. Old people do not enjoy kirtan the way children do. Adults are already contaminated, the mind is completely brainwashed by maya, but children are still fresh and pure.

What allows one to express bhakti yoga in life?

Swami Niranjanananda: Hatha yoga is kindergarten, raja yoga is primary class, kriya yoga and kundalini yoga are the high school and bhakti yoga is the college, the university. Bhakti yoga as it should be understood is not ritual and devotion; it is a lifestyle in which one is living the sattvic qualities and realizes them within. They make one a better being. They mould the character, personality, attitude and behaviour. When these sattvic qualities mould the individual, then that life is the life of a bhakta; and the process of moulding is called bhakti yoga.

What are the ways to develop bhakti?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are three ways one can develop bhakti: daily mantra sadhana, having a personal, uplifting space, and weekly havan.

Mantra: The first method is through mantra and fine-tuning one's attitudes and mind. Chanting the Mahamrityunjaya mantra eleven times, the Gayatri mantra eleven times and the thirty-two names of Durga three times daily, first thing every morning on waking, is part of this sadhana. The Mahamrityunjaya mantra is a healing mantra and should be done with the focus and sankalpa of healing the body, the mind and the total self. The Gayatri mantra should be chanted for the acquisition of wisdom. The Durga mantras should be chanted with the sankalpa of experiencing happiness and removing distress from life.

When one chants these three mantras every day with three sankalpas for healing, wisdom and happiness, one is planting three seeds of sattwa in the gross mind which is subject to tamas. One will begin to experience the energy within becoming more balanced. The sense of wisdom and right attitude develop and one finds more happiness in life. Happiness is illusive. Many spiritual masters have discovered that not only can suffering be overcome, not only can happiness be acquired, but one can transform oneself and become more universal, more connected with other people and less self-centred. The sankalpa plays an important role in creating a positive conditioning of mind.

In raja yoga, after having controlled the five material vrittis, one has to create another vritti connected with the inner self, *brahmi vritti*, the spiritual vritti, the sattvic vritti. One negates the negative by creating a positive; one transforms the negative by constructing a positive environment. One cannot be vrittiless, desireless, emotionless or actionless. Therefore, the ninth and last sadhana of bhakti yoga is to again involve oneself in the world, but this time with purity of self, purity of mind, purity of intention, going into the world and shining.

If one has a guru mantra, it can be practised in the evening as a meditation, and if one is alone it can also be practised aloud in the morning after the first three mantras. When doing the personal mantra, the aspirant should disconnect from the world completely for that period. For ten minutes there is no identification with the body or the needs of the body, with the mind or the needs of the mind. There is just immersion of oneself in remembrance of the mantra and the realization that one is the luminous self, free from experiences of comfort and discomfort, happiness and sorrow, totally stable, firm, fixed, one-pointed. The deeper one goes into the mantra, the more one connects with the vibrations of the mantra, which will change the gross conditioning of consciousness and awaken the subtle forces of consciousness.

Personal space of power and peace: Another bhakti yoga sadhana is having a special place in one's home incorporating symbols that will uplift. It is a corner of strength, power and peace. How one arranges the space is up to each aspirant, whether one places forms such as Ganesha or objects from nature. Such a space creates an uplifting vibration at home. It represents one's reverence and respect for something transcendental and spiritual. It should be honoured with flame, incense and water. Whenever one enters that space, one will feel peaceful, relaxed and quiet within. The mind will associate these feelings and experiences with that space.

Weekly havan: The third bhakti yoga sadhana that can be done at home is havan, connecting with nature. Once a week, on Saturday, with some wood and samagri, a fire can be lit and the Mahamrityunjaya mantra chanted. Fire intensifies the effect of the mantra. Any kind of mantra chanting is more effective if it is done in front of a fire, as the fire tattwa energizes the mantra. Havan is the simplest form of using nature to connect with the divine. Mantra is the simplest form to merge the individual consciousness with the transcendental by cultivating inner intensity. Fire and havan

celebrate the first awakening of consciousness by connecting with the spirit and energy of fire.

Why is bhakti a matter of the heart?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti is above religion, it is above social norms, above culture, beyond male-female relationships. Bhakti is a matter of the heart. Bhakti may be present in a cobbler, in a butcher and in a prostitute.

There is a story about a holy man who lived on one side of a road and a prostitute lived on the other. Much kirtan and bhajan went on in the holy man's house. The dancing girl would wake up early, bathe and come to the window to hear the kirtan, which she enjoyed very much. All day long the holy man judged her from the other side, berating her and calling her names. After death, when both went to God, she passed and he failed.

The way one perceives things is important in bhakti yoga. The bhakta always sees God, never the world. Whether one has talked to a cobbler, touched a sweeper or conversed with a prostitute, these are social matters. It is the worldly vision. Bhakti is not a matter for the brain and the intellect; it is only for the heart. It is only from the heart that faith and trust blossom. How does one know that one's father is really one's father? It is just accepted with faith and trust.

Why do saints, sages and scriptures have little success in inspiring people to become bhaktas?

Swami Satyananda: How many devotees did saints create? How many devotees could Christ create? How many devotees could Chaitanya create? In India, everyone reads the *Ramayana*; it is a must. Everyone worships Devi also. Even the uneducated person reads *Durga Saptashati*, or hears it once a year, but the path of devotion is open to only a few. Therefore, those who do not have a heart for God, who have a heart only for the world, but who can manage to divert some of their time for higher pursuits, should practise kriya yoga and other forms of sadhana. Most people are prepared

to give a little bit of their intelligence to higher practices, but are afraid to give their heart, because they know that if they give it to God, they will become bankrupt. The wife will say, “Where is your heart?” Husband will reply, “I have given it to God.” The son will say, “Father, why don’t you love me?” Father will reply, “How can I love you, when I love God?”

How are people who live an unrighteous life but practise devotion regarded?

Swami Sivananda: It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:30):

*Api chetsuduraachaaro bhajate maamananyabhaak;
Saadhureva sa mantavyah samyagvyavasito hi sah.*

Even if the most sinful worships Me, with devotion to no one else, he too should indeed be regarded as righteous for he has rightly resolved.

Even if the most sinful worships Him with an undivided heart, he too must indeed be deemed righteous for he has made the holy resolution to give up his evil ways. Rogue Ratnakara became Valmiki by his holy resolution. Jagai and Madhai also became righteous devotees. Mary Magdalene, a woman of ill-fame, became a pious woman. Sin vanishes when thoughts of God arise in the mind.

Remembrance of the Lord, thoughts of the Supreme Being, japa and meditation and *abheda Brahma chintan*, contemplation of Brahman with a non-dualistic or *Aham Brahmasmi* or ‘I am the Absolute’ attitude, will destroy the sins committed by a person even in hundred crores of *kalpas* or ages. By abandoning evil ways in one’s external life and by the force of internal right resolution, one becomes righteous and attains eternal peace.

How can the bhakta bring changes into his life?

Swami Satyananda: To live in communion with the Divine, one does not have to reject society or renounce action. One does not have to renounce love, service or any good act or

intention that brings about purification. Only the weakness in the personality needs to be renounced. The aspirant has to know how to discard all that is unwanted within. This cannot be achieved intellectually; it is only possible by living it in one's daily life.

Outer changes help to attain total surrender to the Divine. What made Saint Francis of Assisi a saint? It was not his realization of God, Christ or religion, or his compassion and love. Initially his inspiration was the vow of poverty and chastity that he had taken. To move from a life of luxury to a life of poverty and to maintain that discipline is difficult. One must have the capacity to make external changes, to take a vow and live by it, without giving in to weakness and infirmity.

A vow, *vrat*, reflects a change in lifestyle. One must test oneself and undergo a little physical hardship. Sleep on a mattress on the floor one night a week. Miss a meal one day a week and eat lightly the next day. By making certain adjustments and disciplining oneself little by little, this change in lifestyle will influence the mind. In this way, the practice of surrender comes about. It is moment to moment awareness of living with higher principles, with absolute faith in the higher spirit. One need not bother about one's faults, because every human being has infinite power within. This power needs to be awakened. The weakness of those who aim high is not regarded as weakness, but as their special trait.

Negative influences are one thing, but what about the company of friends?

Swami Sivananda: So-called friends are one's real enemies. Not even a single unselfish friend can be found in this universe. The real friend in need who attends on each one sincerely is God, the indweller of the heart. Worldly friends come to get money and other comforts when one has plenty of money, but not when one is in adverse circumstances.

The world is full of avarice, hypocrisy, double-dealing, flattery, untruth, cheating and selfishness, therefore one

should be careful. Friends waste one's time in idle talk for they have no idea of the value of time. They want to pull the aspirant down and make him worldly. They will say, "Friend, what are you doing? Earn as much money as possible. Live comfortably now. Eat, drink, be merry. Let us go to the talkies. Today there is a new Hollywood production running at such and such a theatre. There is a beautiful American dance. Who knows about the future? Where is God? Where is heaven? There is no rebirth, there is no liberation. It is all the gossip of pandits. Enjoy now. Why do you fast? There is nothing beyond this world. Give up all sadhana and meditation. You are wasting your time." Worldly friends will give such advice, so the aspirant should cut off all connections ruthlessly.

How does the ashram environment increase one's positivity?

Swami Satyananda: Visitors are amazed to find that they begin to feel differently the moment they arrive in the ashram. Negativity turns into positivity; despair and frustration are replaced by a keenness and eagerness to face life squarely. Illnesses cease to torment the body and mind as before. Of course, for the hard core negative individuals the positive influence may not be felt instantly, but nevertheless even such persons cannot resist and are finally drawn out of their shells to look at their problems differently.

This is the essential element which draws people to ashram life. The atmosphere, lifestyle and spiritual vibrations of the ashram restructure the emotional, psychological, psychic and spiritual makeup of the individual until he is able to tune into the higher frequencies reverberating in himself. Naturally he is bound to feel better.

People may not be aware or conscious of the fact that many times their thought patterns, habits and neuroses influence their surroundings negatively. This causes a field of negativity to grow, and although they may think of it as an abstract phenomenon it can be perceived consciously or subconsciously by most people. In time, this rebounds and

deepens the negativity in them. What they had projected as a mere thought force boomerangs back onto them with greater momentum. Many have encountered such experiences.

When describing or depicting a particular setting or home, it is often said that it was warm and inviting, or cold and repelling. It is the people living in a place who make it so. The objects, colour scheme, buildings, trees and setting merely reflect the personalities, thoughts and vibrations of the people who inhabit the place, and in time they acquire the same traits.

In an ashram the positive influence is infinitely greater and far more potent than any negativity that may enter the environment. This is due to the spiritual dedication and simple nature of the people who live there. Anyone who visits the ashram is bound to imbibe that positivity, whether consciously or subconsciously. Moreover, this spiritual and dynamic energy is maintained at a very high level that is constant and consistent.

It is for this reason that householders should try to spend some time each year living in the ashram and, through this experience, eventually create an ashram in their homes. The house itself should become a mini ashram, where not only the family derive benefits, but anyone else who visits feels a sense of warmth, peace and unity.

How does bhakti yoga differ from other yogas?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one wants to discover and enlighten one's own nature then, eventually, bhakti is the way, not jnana yoga, raja yoga or karma yoga. In hatha yoga one only requires the body, in jnana yoga one only requires the intellect, in karma yoga one requires the senses and in raja yoga one requires the mind. However, in bhakti yoga, the lifestyle, behaviour, thinking patterns, intellect, feelings, emotions and social performance are involved. To perfect bhakti yoga, the lifestyle and the individual have to come together.

Divine Life

To be kind, generous, humble and tolerant is Divine Life.
To practise virtues and to be righteous is Divine Life.
To practise non-violence, truth, celibacy is Divine Life.
To serve the poor in a selfless, dedicated way is Divine Life.
To serve the sick with the attitude 'All is God' is Divine Life.
To be merciful, courageous and devotional is Divine Life.
To sing the name of God and pray is Divine Life.
To do japa and meditation is Divine Life.
To be an instrument in the hands of God is Divine Life.
To act rightly and live in God is Divine Life.
To do unconditional self-surrender to God is Divine Life.
To restrain the senses, to have God-communication is Divine Life.
To be one with the Divine Will is Divine Life.
To be a silent witness of the three states is Divine Life.
To have a balanced mind and equal vision is Divine Life.
To identify oneself with one's divine nature is Divine Life.
To be always aware of God's grace is Divine Life.
To behold the One Self everywhere is Divine Life.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

LIVING FOR SOCIETY

What is sacrifice and what are the reasons for sacrifice?

Swami Satyananda: This is a message to everyone. If a person bakes four loaves of bread, one loaf is for society. One's joy, booty and money have to be shared. One's happiness has to be shared with everyone. Everyone should ponder over the plight of that section of society that has been kept deprived for so long. If nothing is given to others, how will one get anything back?

For a human being, the most difficult vow is to forsake, to renounce, to let go. Everyone knows how to collect, how to add up. To renounce means to make a sacrifice. Sacrifice is made for the sake of others, just as a mother makes sacrifices

and abstains from many comforts for the sake of her child's wellbeing. A time should come when people cultivate the habit of giving. Give to everyone, even the affluent, not only to the poor and the destitute. God does not discriminate between rich and poor but He gives to all. He gives to the poorest of the poor and the wealthiest of the wealthy too. This is the way of God and everyone should learn it.

How does one apply bhakti yoga while living in the world?

Swami Niranjanananda: Aspirants may desire self-realization or wellbeing, yet they have not thought about what the aims of yoga are. Yoga wants softening of the heart and mind. Aspirants can soften the heart by living bhakti yoga, with awareness of how they interact with other people, the family, their partner, children, friends, with society and the world at large, in their profession, or in association with property and money.

Money is related to spiritual development, so aspirants should observe the associations of greed, desire and ambition. They should follow their thread of attachment and connection. If it is positive, it must be cultivated. If it is negative, they should try to transform it. That is bhakti yoga, the yoga by which one can eliminate negativity from life and bring about a qualitative change to uplift the mind and to unite one's consciousness with the higher mind.

What guidance is there to help a bhakta lead a balanced spiritual lifestyle?

Swami Satyananda: In the life of a householder, sharing one's wealth with others is of the greatest value. It is the first duty of each householder. The produce from the farm, the profit from the business, the salary one earns from one's job must be shared with other members of society who are less fortunate. One owes a share of one's wealth to the needy members of society and one does not have an exclusive right over the wealth one calls one's own. Grihastha ashrama is a system of distribution. One cannot lay an exclusive claim

to one's earnings as they have been acquired by depriving others of their due share. Whether one is a businessman or a taxi driver, profits are made by cheating others. Nobody in society can earn wealth independently and in isolation.

Should aspiring bhaktas distance themselves from social customs and obligations?

Swami Sivananda: So long as bhakti is not achieved, the ordinary way of life should not be given up, but renunciation of the desire for reward of one's actions and discipline preparatory to it should be persistently practised. Conscious efforts must be made steadily in the form of selfless work and discipline of the mind.

On the attainment of bhakti, or even for the attainment of it, life in society should not be given up. All righteous activities must be continued. Only the fruits of such actions must be relinquished. Sage Vasishtha, Vyasa, Shankaracharya, Jesus, Buddha and others have been the most active benefactors of mankind. It is said in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutra 62):

*Na tat siddhau lokavyavahaaro heyah kintu phala tyaagatat
saadhanancha kaaryameva.*

Until bhakti is developed one must not neglect to observe social customs and ceremonies. One should surely perform them but only the fruits of all social activities are to be surrendered to the Lord.

Worldly duties, such as one's occupation in life and maintaining the family, should also be carefully and scrupulously performed along with religious duties according to the injunctions of the scriptures. A time will come when all activities, religious as well as mundane, will drop by themselves. It is said in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutra 14):

*Loko'pi taavadeva kintu bhojanaadivyaapaarasttvaashaare
eradhaaranaavadhi.*

Social customs and practices also may be followed in like manner, to the same extent only (as scriptural injunctions). But eating, drinking, dressing should be continued as long as one wears this body.

What is meant by social debt?

Swami Satyananda: If one fulfils one's social obligations, only then can one expect progress in spiritual life. A householder must fulfil his social obligations, whether he is a farmer, businessman, teacher or industrialist. Whatever his income, accomplishments and achievements, society must be a compulsory shareholder in it. One must spend a large part of one's income in public and social services. Social services are what society needs. Society needs hospitals, orphanages, food distribution centres in famine-ridden areas, so one must contribute one's share. One should not spend or use all the income or achievements only on oneself and one's family. If this is done, then one is a miser, a selfish person.

It is true that a householder can reach God. A man with a wife and children can have God's grace and darshan, but saying this is not enough. A householder with a wife and children, with all the problems, tragedies, comedies and idiosyncrasies, can have the vision of God, can attain God's grace, but he will have to renounce selfishness. He will have to completely destroy mean-mindedness.

He should set aside a part of his achievement, whatever it is, whether grain or money, power or name, for a social purpose which the people in that country need at the time. Every country has different problems at different times. Somewhere there is anarchy, somewhere crime, somewhere AIDS, somewhere drug addiction. The problems are everywhere. So, one has to give a part of one's earnings and assets to alleviate them and fulfil one's social obligations. That is the social debt because one cannot develop, earn or prosper without a proper, stable society.

Why should a bhakta be benevolent to all?

Swami Sivananda: To feel much for others and little of oneself, to restrain one's selfish nature, constitutes the perfection of human nature. No one in this world is perfectly independent. Everyone is in need of the assistance of others. Everyone is placed in society to receive and confer reciprocal help and mutual obligations. Food, clothes, health, protection from injuries, enjoyment of the comforts and pleasures of life – all these one owes to the assistance of others. Therefore, one should be benevolent and a friend to humankind. A benevolent person rejoices in the happiness and prosperity of his neighbour and all people. One should not wait for extraordinary circumstances to do good actions but try to use ordinary situations.

How does one understand 'social responsibility'?

Swami Satyananda: Social responsibility is necessary because everyone has an obligation towards society. In ancient times, this was called a *rina* or karmic debt: a debt to God, a debt to the sages, a debt to the parents, a debt to all forms of life, and a debt to humankind. These five debts are called social obligations in modern language, and one will never be free from them. Every individual is indebted to society. If there is no society there will be no safety. Everyone will have to pay the debt to society. However, there should be a way, a medium. The lofty souls, the wise ones and the sadhus are the mediums. Societal obligations can be fulfilled through sadhus.

What is a bhakta's responsibility to society?

Swami Satyananda: There are hundreds of thousands of people in our society who do not get the right food. The number of such deprived people is very large in India. Everyone is at liberty to speak high sounding words, but the fact remains that there are many people in this country whose children are deprived of the food they need. Citizens and sannyasins have to think about their duty towards such people. They

also have to be aware that if they do not do their duty, the deprived section of society may not allow them to live in their society.

What does the word 'neighbour' mean? It is the person who lives next door, beside, in front of or behind my house. However, for a man whose heart is open, the whole world is his neighbourhood and everyone is his neighbour. One who has a small, closed heart thinks in terms of, 'This is mine and that is yours'. The bhakta believes that 'everything belongs to You, O God, because you have given it to me. You are the owner, the giver, the treasurer. You are the ocean of prosperity, grace, mercy and love. You gave everything to me so that I could give to others'. Everyone should think like this.

When does bhakti become an integral part of one's life?

Swami Niranjanananda: I used to be a non-believer and I never understood why people used to like bhakti so much. I asked Sri Swami Satyananda, "What is there in bhakti? It is nothing; it is not necessary." He told me, "A time will come when you will understand." Today I do not think that I could accept a life without bhakti, for this feeling of bhakti is a deep internal feeling of having found the missing link of life, the support or basis of existence.

Prior to the awakening of bhakti, life is mechanical – taking birth, leading a routine life, having children, struggling with a job, retiring, leading a retired life and finally going on a long journey. It is like becoming a member of a club called Earth and then leaving it. Bhakti provides the missing aspect, when life stops being mechanical and develops a sense of inner identity and union.

How can professionals offer their services to society?

Swami Sivananda: The doctor who attends his patients with atmabhava, without selfish motive for money, will have a roaring practice. He can give free medicines to the poor. This is a wonderful field for seva. Through this he can purify his heart and evolve quickly. Doctors can impart knowledge

of health to the public and teach first aid to all. A doctor's heart should melt at the suffering of his patient. A doctor should always bear in mind that the knowledge of healing he has acquired is not solely for mercenary gain, but to enable him to play a worthy part in society. Therefore, apart from his 'practice', the doctor should ever watch and see where there is suffering and where his aid is needed.

The businessman who is dishonest in his business dealings and cheats others will be miserable in this world despite his wealth and possessions. The goal of life is not glittering prosperity in business. It is a foolish person's idea of happiness without understanding the law of cause and effect. One should spend regularly one tenth of one's income in charity. One can help social and religious institutions, open ayurvedic dispensaries, hospitals and free primary schools, dig wells in the villages. One's profit should be well used in charitable purposes. In deceiving others one deceives oneself. In helping others, one helps oneself.

A legal practitioner must take up cases from poor people freely. He must work for the public good without fees. This will be his seva. This will purify his heart. Prakriti has given him legal knowledge and he should use this knowledge in protecting Her poor, helpless children.

An industrialist must look after the welfare of his workers, as their labour goes to build up his prosperity. He must know that God has given him industrial acumen, genius for organization and money-power to promote the welfare of the human community. Devotees should use their special talents and wealth for the common good first and then increase their prosperity. When they become helpers for the progress and welfare of the human race they will derive true happiness and peace in addition to material profit.

How can one lead a balanced life and not be swayed by ambitions?

Swami Niranjanananda: This is a question of deciding the priority. The first priority is one's commitment to life which

indicates being healthy and happy. The first requirement of life is health and happiness.

The second requirement is having resources to look after the family. One has to be clear about how to obtain those resources: through involvement in a profession with objective awareness and understanding. This is the second *kartavya* or duty, which is not a momentary *kartavya*; it is a lifelong *kartavya*. Family-related *kartavya* includes everything: parents, children, education, marriage.

The third *kartavya* is to imbibe and live the spiritual teachings of the guru. One may not have a physical guru; still, one has the guidelines in the scriptures, shastras or literature which describe the stages and steps to live a spiritual discipline. The fourth duty is the *pitri kartavya*, duty to the ancestors. In Hindi, they are known as *rina*, a debt, however, they are actually duties.

Along with these *kartavyas*, one has one's own ambitions. In managing one's health, one can be just healthy or become Mr Universe; that is a choice. In acquisition of resources, one can just keep on accumulating or be content at a certain level. If one defines objectively what the *kartavyas* are, one will be able to isolate the ambitions. Then one can define the ambitions which are realistic, achievable and unrealistic, not achievable.

What can happen to a bhakta who totally surrenders himself to God?

Swami Satyananda: In Munger, where the ashram is located, there was one man who worked for the department of education as a school inspector. He was known as a great bhakta and used to spend his mornings and evenings in worship, prayer and devotion. At the same time, he also served many swamis, saints or religious men who visited Munger. He invited them into his house and gave them as much food and comforts as he could afford on his low wage. One day, just as he was leaving for a compulsory inspection tour of one school in a remote village, a few miles

from Munger, some swamis passed by his house. As was his custom, he invited them in and cooked food for them.

After about three hours, bidding them farewell, he rode on his bicycle to the school, which he was supposed to have inspected according to the rules of the government. When he entered the school premises, the watchman came running out in surprise, “Sir, did you forget something? Why have you come back again?” The inspector replied, “But I never came here. I want to see the register and make an entry to avoid any action against me.” The watchman said, “But you have already done it!” When he opened the inspector’s book, he found his own signature was there, although he had not signed. “Who has come to my rescue?” For a moment he stood there and a vision or inspiration came to him that there is a force, a personal God, who will do anything for the sake of his devotee, in order to relieve him from troubles, in order to support him in this life of affliction. He is one who can take care of anything.

From that day, he never returned to Munger, instead he went to Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama, where he remained preaching only one thing: Don’t worry about your life. If you have to have your children educated, if you are in difficulty, just surrender completely – mentally, intellectually, emotionally – and everything will happen at the right time. Even though he was an ordinary man, the people who believed in him had great and good experiences in life.

A BHAKTA’S HEALTH

What is the relationship between diet and consciousness?

Swami Satyananda: If one wants to proceed along the path of raja yoga, hatha yoga, bhakti yoga or jnana yoga, it is recommended that one become a total vegetarian. However, frankly speaking, the body and mind are definitely influenced by diet, but there is something more to man and that is his consciousness. This consciousness is beyond the body and mind, and diet has no influence on its evolution.

Consciousness is above diet. Whether one eats fruit, cooked or raw vegetables, cheese, butter, beef or ham, it makes no difference to the consciousness.

Can a bhakta yogi and a karma yogi eat almost anything?

Swami Satyananda: A bhakta yogi's diet is special. He can eat sweets, he can take cheese, he can swallow butter, he can take all kinds of confectionery, or he can eat and eat and eat, for the path of bhakti yoga is like that. Similarly karma yogis can take cheese, coffee and a little bit of champagne also, because they are working in the garden or the kitchen of the guru. If they eat raw food or cooked food, everything will be all right, because in their case, the metabolism is fast as it is in bhakti yoga.

How important is fasting for a bhakti yogi?

Swami Satyananda: Many people have asked about the purpose of fasting. There should be purity of body and mind during pooja. This is necessary if one is to sit for three hours of worship. The mind too should not be dissipated, that is important.

As a rule, one should fast once a week. Whatever the day may be, one day a week one can fast for Narayana, for God. Fasting is good from the point of bhakti as well. Fasting must be done with discipline, not at one's whim and fancy. Ekadashi comes twice a month, *poornima* and *amavasya*, the full moon and dark moon, come once a month with regularity. One can make it a point to fast for at least thirty to forty days a year. There are tremendous benefits; it gives a lot of *ananda*, bliss. The body becomes a little thin, but that is a bonus; a fat body is a liability.

Is fasting necessary for Ishwara bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: Fasting is not directly necessary for Ishwara bhakti. However, the body which one has been given as an instrument for Ishwara bhakti needs to fast to remain in working order. Bhakti is done through the body.

If the body is sick, it will produce gases, wind and belching. Therefore, fasting is necessary to keep this in check. The idea that fasting will please God is not something that I believe in; however, bhaktas should fast.

How important is it to have a healthy body in bhakti yoga?

Swami Sivananda: Spiritual practice is not possible without good health. A sickly, dilapidated body stands in the way of doing practice or discipline. The aspirant should try his level best to keep good health always by regular exercise, asana, pranayama, moderation in diet, walking, running in open air, regularity in his work, meals, sleep. He must take recourse to nature-cure such as fresh air, wholesome food, cold bath and dietetic adjustment, and should always keep a cheerful attitude of mind under all conditions of life. Cheerfulness is a powerful mental tonic. There is intimate connection between body and mind. If one is cheerful, the body is healthy. That is the reason why doctors now prescribe laughing three times daily in the treatment of diseases.

Some foolish aspirants refuse to take medicine when they are ailing seriously. They say, “It is my karma. We should not go against the will of God. The body is illusory and insentient. If I take medicine, it will increase body-idea.” This is foolish philosophy. These foolish people unnecessarily torture the body, allow the disease to strike a deep root and spoil their health.

Why is satsang necessary for one’s wellbeing?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Sanskrit, *sanga* means association, coming together, *sat* means realizing the true nature. One who realizes the truthful nature and associates with those who are truthful is a *satsangi*, one who is involved in the process of truthful association. Most decisions about friends and associates are not mature, but based on likes, dislikes, ambitions and needs. People who are trying to improve their associations and qualities are yogis. Practising postures in front of a mirror is not yoga. Yoga is taking responsibility for

oneself. Postures, meditation, kundalini and kriya yoga do not represent yoga; they are systems and practices belonging to a group called yoga. It is one's conviction and motivation to change and bring the beauty of the universe into one's life which is the aspiration of yoga. Therefore, the first aspect of wellbeing is imbibing the right philosophy, first defining, realizing and knowing with whom you associate.

Why is satsang a good way for an aspiring bhakta to begin the spiritual search?

Swami Satyananda: The essence of man's personality is spiritual. The essence of every matter is energy. The aim of creation is one, and therefore a person who is fed up with the monotony of life will have to find his central point in the spirit. As such he should first of all go to satsang. Satsang means where people gather with a positive objective. They don't join to smoke, dance or drink. They just join for spiritual purpose, for peace of mind. Peace of mind is necessary to overcome the emotion of monotony. After one has gone to satsang for some time, one must dedicate oneself to selfless service. Selfless service is the cleaner of the mind.

Do certain operations cool the emotions down?

Swami Satyananda: No. You can cool down the understanding, but emotion remains even after operation. I have known one person who had a frontal lobotomy. He does not understand what we are and who he is, but he can instinctively love and hate. He feels like any other man, but he does not understand what he is feeling. I think that the connecting link between the emotion and the brain has been cut, so he is unable to express it. Supposing one becomes emotional and starts weeping, there is immediate expression. However, if the nervous system has been disconnected, one has emotions, but one can't cry, one can't speak, one can't think. Certain changes take place in the heart which cannot be expressed.

What happens if the emotions are only suppressed, not sublimated?

Swami Satyananda: If the natural instinct is suppressed due to one's children, husband, wife or somebody else being affected, problems will arise either in one's nature, in one's physiological system or in one's behaviour. If there is more suppression, diseases can also arise, like asthma and cancer, which come from suppressing emotions and the natural instinct. Many physical diseases are expressions of suppressed natural instincts.

Therefore, suppression is not good. These natural instincts such as passions, fear and anger have to be simplified and changed.

What are the effects of suppressed emotions?

Swami Satyananda: The subject of stabilizing emotions is usually forgotten or treated lightly as if emotions are non-existent. The attitude seems to be that if the emotions cannot be tamed, then one pretends they don't exist, like the ostrich that buries its head in the ground when it senses danger. This may make it feel safer, but it does not prevent it being eaten by a lion. If one wants to harmonize one's life, it is useless being like the ostrich and pretending that the emotions are non-existent. This attitude will lead nowhere, for the emotions are ever present.

One may gain mental peace for short spells of time, but this tranquillity will be disturbed by the monsters of emotions when they show their ominous heads from the depths. Suppressed emotions eventually bubble to the surface and create disruptions. To gain lasting peace in life it is not sufficient to attain perfect physical health and some control over the thoughts. The emotions must also be transformed so that they are in accord with every action and thought. Without gaining emotional harmony and one-pointedness, it is impossible to gain mental and physical harmony.

How can one improve the quality of mind?

Swami Satyananda: Love cannot be forced. Love is a spontaneous manifestation of mental purity. The cleaner the mirror, the better the reflection. It is the mirror that has to be polished, not one's face. In the same way bhakti is the quality of the inner man. Passion is the quality of the outer man, and attachment is the quality of the lower man. Attachment to passion and devotion are made of the same stuff. If bhakti or love has to be expressed, then the easiest way is to look within.

When the plants are watered, the flowers bloom. When the flowers bloom, they waft fragrance. Bhakti is the fragrance, the inner spirit is the flower and the mind is the plant. Spiritual practices and satsang are like watering the plant. Just as one protects the plant from pests, in the same way the mind should be protected from the negative influences of life and mind. Maya is powerful. It lives with man all the time and eats away his plant very slowly, but he does not realize it until the plant is completely eaten away.

How can a bhakta be defined?

Swami Niranjanananda: A bhakta is not a devotee; a bhakta is one who has learnt to appreciate himself and what he is. It is the acceptance of oneself: 'I am what I am, with all the qualities, faults, eccentric behaviour, positive behaviour, good and bad thoughts'. It is learning to appreciate oneself, accepting the situations and experiences as part of one's natural growth.

How can one attain a healthy emotional body?

Swami Satyananda: When practising hatha yoga, one is able to correct the energy flows and control the brain waves, but is that all there is in life? What happens to the emotions? One may have a healthy body, but one negative emotion can make one a criminal, can make one commit suicide or become violent. One negative emotion can bring about depression in the nervous system. What one has gained through the

hatha yoga practices can be lost in one minute, one second or a fraction of a second if one does not have a strong and healthy emotional body. Therefore, bhakti yoga relates to the emotional body.

This emotional body is man's important body. If it can be understood and handled, if total balance can be created in the emotional body, in the excited, upsurging emotions, in the depleted or surplus emotions, in the conflicting and confused emotions, if they can be centred properly the feelings and emotions will be very healthy.

How does bhakti yoga influence the health of the emotional body?

Swami Satyananda: Emotions play the most important role in one's life. They play an important part in the expression of feelings such as love, hatred, joy, elation, sorrow and suffering. Ninety percent of one's external, day-to-day life is controlled by one's emotional body, but one has not taken care of it. Everybody wants to experience love and joy. Nobody wants to feel hatred and sorrow. Everybody wants to receive a happy message, everybody wants to be praised. Nobody wants the other side. So what happens? In the absence of training, if one receives a shock, bad news or something one doesn't want, something undesirable, at once the emotional body falls flat. Just as there is physical heart failure, in the same way there is another kind of emotional heart failure, and both heart failures can be connected at some point or the other. Breakdown in emotion affects the heart.

Bhakti yoga is the supreme form of yoga. It is the easiest, safest, quickest, cheapest and best of all, because through the practice of bhakti yoga one is trying to express one's noble emotions, surplus emotions, confused emotions, complicated emotions and emotions of various kinds. One is getting rid of them. Feeling guilt in one's mind is an emotion. When one is repenting, necessarily or unnecessarily, that is an emotion. When praying or choosing a guru for oneself, that

is an emotion. Therefore, bhakti yoga should be considered as the supreme form of yoga, though of course, it is not the only form of yoga.

Why is bhakti yoga necessary for the management of emotions and neuroses?

Swami Satyananda: Surplus emotions, uncontrolled and unfulfilled desires are exhausted by the practice of bhakti yoga. Human beings are emotional beings. They try to channel their emotions in their love for their wife, husband, children, relatives and friends, but love for worldly objects cannot give fulfilment, and unfulfilled love creates complexes. Instead of controlling the emotions, the emotions control the person, which results in all sorts of maladjustments and evils.

Bhakti yoga takes care of the surplus emotions. It can transform mundane neuroses into sublime neurosis, but along with bhakti yoga one should also practise karma and jnana yoga.

DRAUPADI

The life of Draupadi was an outstanding example of faith and devotion to the Divine and she was a beloved friend of Sri Krishna. Though her father was Drupad, the king of Panchala, she was born out of the sacred fire pit or yajna vedi. At the time of her birth there was a heavenly proclamation that she was born to fulfil a divine plan and would be responsible for the destruction of the kshatriyas. Draupadi was extremely intelligent, fearless and beautiful. She was also called *Krishnaa* due to her dusky complexion.

According to a boon she had received from Shiva in her previous life, she was to have five husbands. She was won by Arjuna as his bride during her swayamvara. In accordance with the directive given by Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, she

became the wife of the five brothers. She was a faithful wife and a devotee of Sri Krishna. She had unshakeable love and trust in Sri Krishna whom she saw as her friend, protector and well-wisher. He was the one closest to her heart. She had full faith in his omnipresence and omnipotence.

In the court of the Kauravas, when she was being terribly insulted and Dushasana began to disrobe her, the people present at court were silent spectators to her plight and no one lifted a finger to help her or object to this calumny. Draupadi called on Sri Krishna to rescue her from this horrendous calamity. She pleaded and prayed to him with total trust and surrender and the Lord heard her prayer. He performed a miracle whereby Draupadi's saree continued to grow longer and longer no matter how many lengths of it were being pulled off by Dushasana. Finally, he grew weary with his efforts and gave up his attempt to humiliate Draupadi in this cruel manner. This miraculous rescue in full view of the court was a testament to Sri Krishna's protection over his most beloved devotee as also undeniable proof of her trust and faith in him.

There is an instance of another miraculous deed performed by Sri Krishna to save Draupadi from an embarrassing predicament. When the Pandavas and Draupadi were living in the Kamyaka forest, she had been given a magical cooking pot blessed by the Sun God. It was always full of food at mealtimes. Only after Draupadi had served everyone and then had her meal would it become empty until it was time for the next meal. Duryodhana was well aware of this and in order to put the Pandavas in a difficult situation he told Rishi Durvasa and a thousand of his students to call upon them well after Draupadi had taken her meal. They were courteously received by Yudhishtira and invited to partake of their hospitality by having a meal. This put Draupadi in a quandary as the pot would only replenish itself with food the next day.

When the rishi and his students went to the river Ganga to perform their ablutions before the meal, she cried out to Sri

Krishna in desperation. Being all-knowing and all-seeing, Sri Krishna appeared before her and she told him of her awkward situation and her fear of the consequences if Rishi Durvasa could curse them for their inhospitable treatment. Disregarding her story, Sri Krishna asked Draupadi to give him something to eat as he had travelled a long way to get there and was starving. She wept and said that the pot was empty. Sri Krishna insisted on being shown the pot so he could be sure that it was really empty. Puzzled by his odd request, Draupadi brought him the pot. Sri Krishna put his hand inside and took out a single leaf of spinach that was stuck to the rim of the pot. Putting it into his mouth with great relish, he said that this would satisfy and fulfil the hunger of every person on earth, it was so sumptuous. He said that everyone would be replete with nourishment from this single leaf. He then asked Sahadeva to escort the Rishi and his students back from the river so that they may have their meal.

When Sahadeva reached the river bank there was no one there and he was puzzled. What had happened was that as soon as Sri Krishna had eaten that single leaf of spinach, the students who were finishing their bath suddenly found that their stomachs were full, as if they had just had a huge meal. Under such circumstances, they wondered how they could go and have a meal as guests of the Pandavas. When Rishi Durvasa was told about this, he realized that there was some Divine hand at play. He had been witness to the miracles Sri Krishna performed to protect his devotees in a few earlier instances and he did not want to incur the wrath of Krishna upon himself. Deciding that it would be prudent to leave as soon as they could, the Rishi and his students quickly went away. Sahadeva returned to tell Yudhishtira that he could not see anyone by the river. Thus did Sri Krishna avert an embarrassing situation for the Pandavas and Draupadi, and saved them from Rishi Durvasa's wrath.

The proclamation made at Draupadi's birth did come true. One of the causes of the great Mahabharata war was to avenge the humiliation Draupadi had faced at the hands of the

Kauravas. It spelt the doom of the clan of the Kauravas and wiped out the kshatriyas from the face of the earth. She did fulfil the role that she was destined to play after all.

Draupadi is mistakenly seen as a vengeful, unforgiving woman for instigating this great war, however, there is an episode that bears testimony to the depth of her mercy and compassion towards those who had wronged her. After the Mahabharata war was over, Ashwatthama stealthily came into the camp of the Pandavas in the dead of night and against all codes of acceptable behaviour slaughtered every single person there while they were asleep, including Draupadi's children. She was inconsolable with grief at this loss and Bhima set off to capture Ashwatthama to make him pay for this terrible crime. Once he had been caught and brought in front of Draupadi trussed up in ropes like an animal, she was overcome with mercy. She asked that he be treated with the same respect they had for his father, Dronacharya, their teacher and guru, who had instructed them in the skills of war and weapons.

Draupadi knew what tragedy befalls a mother when her children die and she did not want Kripa, his mother, to suffer that fate. Saying that it was against dharma to ill-treat a Brahmin, she told Bhima to set Ashwatthama free. Such was her compassion and adherence to dharma even at the time of her own sorrow. She forgave the man who had murdered her own children.

When Arjuna returned from Dwarka with the news of the annihilation of the entire Yadu clan, Yudhishtira conducted the coronation of Parikshit and relinquished all royal duties to him. The five Pandavas and Draupadi took a vow of silence and donning garments of tree bark, they set off towards the Himalayas never to return. Draupadi walked behind them and they went past Badrikashram and climbed further up into the Himalayas. Walking in complete silence without even looking at each other, they pushed onwards into the heights of the Himalayas. Draupadi slipped on the snow but did not utter a

sound and no one looked back at her either. Her body merged into the spotless snow and disappeared. Draupadi become one with the five elements or *tattwas* as she was truly an embodiment of Divine Shakti herself.

How does faith give relief from problems of the mind and society?

Swami Satyananda: Society has given everything. It has provided the comforts of the body, abundant prosperity and total social security, but it was not society who gave crime, juvenile delinquency, insecurity and unrest among the population. Society did not give tensions – mental, emotional or physical or the need for pills, tranquillizers, alcohol, cigarettes. It did not give clubs and night clubs, those methods of escaping from the realities of life and oneself. Lastly, society has not given a cure, but the situation, the state of mind goes from bad to worse and finally to hopeless.

It is in this light that yoga can be thought of as a treatment, a relief from the ailments of the mind and society as a whole. For example, people who have succeeded in life tend to suffer from coronary thrombosis. The disease is a product of having no faith, no security in success; they are always anxious of losing it. Yoga instils faith in a person. Faith in oneself and one's abilities, so much so that the question of success never troubles one. Success comes automatically.

Yoga can also instil a sense of spirituality in a person, a faith in oneself as a servant of God so that if success comes, it was only due to the grace of God. God has become the power, the force behind the person. Life, one's work, one's success or failure is dependent upon God. God is carrying the luggage, the burden of life. As God is the guiding light, one's personality and mind are pure and relaxed, tension free. People have been breathing, thinking, acting, going about their daily habits, in fact their entire life unconsciously, moving from day to day unconsciously. If they have never

tried to breathe, think and act then how is it possible that these activities go on automatically? They must accept that there is some other Law, some other Director who has been doing these activities for them. As they have been unconscious of their life, they have been also unconscious of Him. This is the basis, the theory behind yoga, the awareness of this other Self.

Who benefits from bhakti yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti yoga is for those people with emotional disorders, for it purifies the emotions. Psychic disorders and personality errors can only be eliminated by the practice of meditation or *dhyana*. When it is said that meditation brings about enlightenment and ultimately self-realization or God-realization, it is true, but at the same time unless there is complete quietness in all dimensions of the personality, God-realization can never take place. Whether one is treating the mental personality or trying for God-realization, yoga is the common method.

How does bhakti yoga connect the individual with the infinite recipient of love?

Swami Satyananda: This energy which man has so much of inside must be properly directed. If the whole of this emotional energy is given to family members, the outlet is still not sufficient. A person can love the whole world, as a matter of fact, he has so much energy but he does not know how to do this.

Ultimately, it was decided by the ancient seers that one must discover the cosmic being, the Supreme Being and give whatever love one has to Him. In this way the unused treasure of love which has been misused in so many ways can be properly channelled. Since He is infinite, He can consume all the love He is given.

He can be given love in the form of play, in the form of praying, in the form of service to humanity, in the form of calm and quiet meditation, in the form of self-purification or

by chanting His name day in and day out. He can be given love in any manner and He is able to consume it, because He is eternal and infinite. This concept of bhakti yoga is one of the wonderful methods of bringing people to normal behaviour.

Why has no one experienced love?

Swami Niranjanananda: Love is something that no one has ever experienced in life. People have experienced physical, mental and emotional passion. They have experienced infatuation, yet they have not experienced love. They have confused infatuation, passion and obsession with love. Love cannot be experienced without acquiring understanding. Understanding has to come first and love comes next.

How does mantra bestow health?

Swami Sivananda: Chanting of mantras generates potent spiritual waves or divine vibrations. They penetrate the physical and astral bodies of the patients and remove the root causes of suffering. They fill the cells with pure *sattwa* or divine energy. They destroy the microbes and vivify the cells and tissues. They are the best, most potent antiseptics and germicides. They are more potent than ultraviolet rays or Röntgen rays.

He who has attained mantra siddhi can cure a cobra bite, scorpion sting or any chronic disease by a mere touch on the affected part. When a person is bitten by a cobra a telegram is sent to the mantra siddha. The mantra siddha recites the mantra and the person who was bitten by a cobra is cured. What a grand marvel! Does this not prove the tremendous power of mantra?

Why are people encouraged to clap and dance during kirtan?

Swami Satyananda: Clapping during kirtan is not for entertainment. It is a cardiac exercise that heats the system, energizes the body and also works on the heart. When

a person sings, the veins and arteries that support the circulation of blood in the heart become contracted. Clapping assists in the normal circulation of the blood to the heart by relaxing and expanding these vessels. Normally when the arteries become constricted, the blood circulation stops, and this causes a heart attack. In such a situation, a physician would administer certain medicines that allow the blood to circulate again. Clapping while singing kirtan or bhajans is like medicine for the heart and it is essential for spiritual life.

In olden times, girls from good families did not dance because people would criticize them, but now when they dance they are appreciated. In the past, if a collector or commissioner started clapping it was not appreciated, but now people say he is a great devotee. This is also a positive change. At times joking is necessary to break the monotony and a person should also laugh if it makes him feel lighter.

A person should not hesitate to do two things: clapping and laughing. He should not even suppress tears. Laughter, tears, clapping and shouting are good for his health. Crying, clapping, laughing and dancing are part of bhakti yoga.

There is only one secret to health. A person can choose to dance in the name of *bhoga*, materialism, or dance to the tune of yoga. He can do dynamic or silent kirtan. In dynamic kirtan he sings while jumping and dancing, just like the devoted Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Mirabai used to. So to purify the body and mind a person should keep on singing God's name as well as jumping and dancing. Sing:

Naache Gopala, sundar laala, naache Sri Hari keertan men.

Dance, beautiful Gopala, dance in the Lord's kirtan.

Dancing at the time of the Lord's kirtan is an aspect of sadhana. There is an ancient understanding that kirtan is the best way to be close to God, to be near Him.

THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

How does the practice of bhakti relate to brahmacharya?

Swami Satyananda: The purpose of sexual interaction between a man and a woman is threefold: progeny, pleasure and higher awareness. This is the one activity where man forgets everything. That particular state is called unity, and at that time one is uniting with oneself. Just for a moment one is one with oneself. There is nobody else, no telephone, no knocking at the door, nothing. One sees oneself at that time. One withdraws within oneself and that gives one a glimpse of the state of mind which one experiences in bhakti. This is the concept of brahmacharya.

Does bhakti yoga allow one to overcome the instinct of sexuality?

Swami Niranjanananda: The process of yoga is one of understanding and realizing. The process of bhakti yoga is understanding and realizing the nature and quality of emotion. It is an experience of the heart, not of the instincts. One confronts one's instincts when one practises kundalini yoga. Instincts are the weights that hold one down to this gross dimension. Sexuality grasps the attention, and that attention becomes the search for satisfaction and pleasure. However, if one is able to sublimate the instinct of sexuality, it leads to samadhi. Progeny and pleasure are the main aims of sexuality in life, yet sublimation of the sex drive leads to moksha.

Can bhakti be practised if our love is carnal love?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the darkness of life, love is a rainbow. Love is the northern star in everyone's life. Love is the mother of music, arts, philosophy, scriptures. Love is the mother of all that is beautiful. Therefore, this love has to be cultivated to the maximum, but love at present is directed to one's near and dear ones. That has to change. There are five passions which are considered to be the enemies of

love: carnal passion, anger, greed, delusion and self-centred awareness.

Carnal love has to be managed through brahmacharya, by lifting the mind from carnal pleasures to transcendental happiness and joy. Anger has to be dealt with through forgiveness. Greed has to be managed by developing *vairagya*, dispassion. Confusion or the deluded state of mind has to be managed through right thinking. Self-oriented love has to convert into an ever-expanding expression of compassion and love.

These five enemies can be controlled by five warriors. In this way one has to manage the mind through meditation, reflection, analysis and understanding. Once one is able to control these five internal enemies of life, of one's love and one's bhakti, then one is on the right track. If aspirants practise bhakti yoga and are still influenced by these five enemies, they are not on the right track.

Is married life a hindrance to experiencing bhakti?

Swami Sivananda: One need not retire into the Himalayan caves. One can live in the world with family and children amidst peace and plenty. As it is said in the Bible, 'Be in the world, but not of the world'.

A good wife, a worthy jewel, is the materialization of the Lord's infinite grace for one who treads the pravritti marga. Harmony in every walk of life is a rare gift of the Lord to a couple. Each partner should be to the other a true companion in every sense of the term. Grihastha ashrama is a safe rung in the ladder of evolution to Godhead. True union can be established on the spiritual basis. Both partners should aspire to realize the common goal of life – God-realization. Both partners should compete with each other in advancing rapidly in spiritual sadhana. What a novel competition! What a blessing it is to have such a competitor as the life-partner!

How can one transmute desire for sex?

Swami Sivananda: Man was created for a life of spiritual communion with God. Moral goodness consists in renouncing all sensuous pleasures, in separating from the world, in living solely after the spirit, in imitating the perfection and purity of God. Sensuality is inconsistent with wisdom and holiness. The great business of life is to avoid impurity. Man has degraded himself to a great degree by becoming a puppet of passion. He has become an imitative machine. He has lost his power of discrimination. If he wishes to regain his lost divine state and Brahmic glory, his whole being must be completely transmuted by entertaining sublime divine thoughts and practice of regular meditation. Transmutation of sex-desire is a potent, efficacious and satisfactory way to realize eternal bliss.

How should bhaktas relate to the opposite sex?

Swami Sivananda: Spiritual aspirants should have the bhava that ladies are manifestations of the World Mother. They should be adored. This practice is for a beginner on the spiritual path. Later they should develop atmabhava, everything is Self. Otherwise they will begin to hate ladies and will not develop cosmic love. The above mental picture is kept up to annihilate passion. It is a mental discipline and the sex-idea will gradually vanish and with it the attraction and passion.

Men should entertain the *matri bhava*, mother bhava, Ishwari bhava or atmabhava towards women. Sister bhava will not suffice. Ladies should entertain *pitru bhava*, father bhava, Ishwara bhava or atmabhava towards males. There is no passion in the sexless Atman.

The cultivation of the bhava is difficult. One may fail to develop the bhava that all women are mothers and sisters one hundred and one times. It does not matter, for one is bound to succeed eventually. One will have to destroy the old mind and build a new mind with fiery and iron determination. The bhava will gradually manifest by constant practice.

SADHANA

What is the sadhana of a bhakta?

Swami Niranjanananda: To empty oneself of desires, ego and selfishness and to free oneself from negative, destructive, detrimental actions should be the effort of an aspirant on the path of bhakti. Bhakti yoga is not ritual and worship. Bhakti yoga is the process of purifying, transforming and channelling one's emotions towards the divine through the techniques and methods of bhakti yoga.

What is a bhakta's sadhana for the family?

Swami Sivananda: At night, the parents should sit before the picture of the Lord along with their children, family members and servants. They can do kirtan for one or two hours but they must be regular in the practice. They will derive immense peace and strength from singing the Lord's name from the bottom of the heart.

What is the outcome of sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: Through sadhana one can have complete mastery over the mind, passions, emotions and impulses. One is able to remove the disturbing elements from the mind. Regular spiritual practice can help in business life as well as in daily life, and it gives restful sleep. Sadhana will infuse the aspirant with new strength, confidence and self-reliance.

Sadhana should make one ever cheerful, more concentrated, joyful, balanced, peaceful, contented, fearless, courageous, compassionate, angerless, selfless and desireless. Seeing visions and lights or hearing transcendental sounds does not have much spiritual value, although they indicate that one has attained some small degree of concentration. Sadhana should give a rich inner life, an introspective inner vision and equilibrium under all conditions of life. These are the signs of spiritual growth.

Sadhana is spiritual practice in order to transcend the three gunas. *Sattwa guna* is the enlightening quality; it is of

the nature of light and harmony. *Rajoguna* is the inflaming quality, the nature of passion and motion. *Tamoguna* is the enveloping or obscuring quality, the nature of inertia and darkness. These are the forces of *maya*, the illusory power of God, that bind the soul to the world.

What is the secret of sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: Sadhana is the purpose for which an individual has come into the world. It is a lifelong process. One must have interest and liking for one's sadhana, understand well the technique and benefits of sadhana and select a suitable sadhana. Self-discipline is essential. One has to destroy the negative tendencies first before one develops positive qualities.

One is backed up at all times by a mighty power that works throughout the cosmos. Therefore, one has nothing to fear, but take care of the details in one's sadhana. If one has strong determination and makes a firm resolve, sadhana becomes easy. The heart expands and one has a new, wide vision.

Can daily reading of the *Ramacharitamanas* awaken bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: In the ashram we chant *Ramacharitamanas* every morning at four o'clock. Sometimes there are five people, sometimes only two and at times there is only one swami. Sometimes people come from outside and then the number increases to eight or ten.

If one performs this reading at home, there is no need to gather a crowd. If the head of the house returns from work and goes to sleep after eating dinner, those who were at home all day should do the reading. Then God will dwell in that home. To invite God and to find a place for Him in one's home, one should do that chanting regularly. To have God's power in one's house, just twenty minutes will do, the chanting of two stanzas only.

How can a bhakta balance spiritual and daily life?

Swami Sivananda: Divine life and ordinary life should not be separated. All activities may be turned into worship if only one does not forget the constant remembrance of the Lord and if one keeps up the divine bhava or right mental attitude during work.

The ears that do not hear the glories of the Lord are like holes in the earth where snakes dwell. The tongue that does not sing the praises of God is as useless as the tongue of a pig. The Name uttered knowingly or unknowingly burns up sins just as fire burns fuel. He who does kirtan and japa of the Lord's names derives the merit of all austerities, of all sacrifices, of baths in all sacred waters, and of study of the Vedas. Just as the sun removes the darkness of mountain caves, just as the powerful wind makes a heavy cloud vanish, even so, the kirtan and japa of the divine Name enter the heart and bring sorrows and miseries to an end. Therefore, the constant practice of kirtan, hearing and remembrance of the Name and glory of God is surely the best and supreme method for the attainment of devotion and God-realization.

How can one transform one's life?

Swami Satyananda: To transform one's life, to overcome frustrations and failures, to turn defeats into victories, to make a weak body strong, there has to be something strong and powerful, and that is faith in God and the power of prayer. One should reflect on one's drawbacks through introspection and seek God's support to reform oneself.

God is the easiest thing in this world to attain. One can catch Him in one's hands quite easily. To renounce, to give up something is the easiest action. It takes just a moment. The joy one gets from accumulating something is not a patch on the joy one gets from giving it up. Only when one gets knocks and blows in the daily battle of life does the mind turn towards the spiritual path.

When one begins to see one's shortcomings, the first transformation begins. A change begins to percolate through

to neighbours and the people around. Once attention is paid to the immediate neighbours a transformation in one's destiny will be set off. The same happiness that had given the slip will start coming one's way again. For this, first of all one will have to look within.

How can the state of inner balance be sustained on a daily basis?

Swami Satyananda: There is only one instrument but its names are two. Some know it by the name of renunciation, *vairagya*; some call it devotion, *bhakti*. However, it is one and the same. If the mind liberates itself from attachment to senses, then it is renunciation. When it attaches itself to God, it is devotion. Vibhishana left Ravana and accepted Rama. When love comes, the superimposition of the world disappears. If *bhakti* is strong, the state of renunciation comes effortlessly; this is the only instrument by which the daily impact of existence does not influence the inner being.

How should a bhakta integrate the practice of repeating God's name into his life?

Swami Satyananda: The way to peace and happiness is neither through family nor money. Peace and happiness can be attained only by chanting the name of God. One may repeat God's name in the morning or evening, or at any time. However, if the wallet is full and one does not need to work, then one can repeat God's name all day long. There is simply no other way to acquire peace and happiness.

The scriptures, *shastras*, and saints have sanctioned a retreat into solitude even for householders. Prophet Mohammed and Jesus Christ said the same thing: happiness and peace is to be found only in the repetition of God's name.

How should one use a spiritual diary?

Swami Sivananda: In a spiritual diary one should note down when one becomes angry towards others and when one hurts the feelings of others. This is important. If one exhibits

anger or hurts others, one should impose self-punishment on oneself, such as giving up meals at night or doing fifty malas of japa more. In the diary it should be written: 'I have forgotten to see God in man two times this day'. If one proceeds in this way for one or two years one will doubtless realize remarkable peace, wonderful spiritual progress and strong willpower. Many kinds of miseries, troubles and mental torments will come to an end. Devotion will develop and one will evolve rapidly. One will be a changed person.

Turning over the pages of the diary once a week, one will notice that one has committed twenty mistakes daily in the beginning and only five in a day after six months. A good time will come when not even a single mistake in a day will be committed. Benjamin Franklin kept this kind of diary.

What are the two types of sadhana in bhakti yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are two types of sadhana in bhakti yoga. One is *antaranga*, internal, and the other is *bahiranga*, external. The sadhana of bhakti yoga starts with antaranga sadhana. The base of antaranga sadhana is mantra, japa, kirtan. The principle of antaranga sadhana is keeping the positive thoughts with oneself always and keeping negative thoughts away.

At the time of mantra chanting, the restlessness of the mind is calmed at the psychological level and focused on the chosen deity. When the mantra is chanted at a religious level, the connection is made with the deity. Japa is the process of deviating emotions internally. As long as the mantra is chanted, such as *Om Namah Shivaya*, *Om Namah Bhagavate Vasudevaya*, the mind is connected to that deity. A bridge is built between the bhakta and the chosen deity. By climbing that bridge one is able to reach the beloved God. This is the result of mantra, japa, ritual, kirtan. Antaranga sadhana in religious bhakti is considered coming closer to God.

In the bahiranga practice, the first step of bhakti yoga is to serve. The second step is to love, and the third is to give. Through these three practices one attains internal

purification. Swami Sivananda used to say: serve, love, give and purify. Then, when one is purified one becomes good; when one becomes good, the performance is good and one does good.

What is your experience of bhakti sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: Every individual should first look at their own routine, the availability of time, their own level of enthusiasm, their occupation. One should practise sadhana without any expectation of results from its practise.

In this age, the two practices that are best for sadhana are kirtan and japa. From time to time and if one feels like it, one can have the darshan of God by going to any place of pilgrimage like Gaya or Deoghar. One can even go to the hilltop of Parasnath, what difference does it make? It is people who have created these differences. Everything is one; it is people who have stamped them with various labels.

A person should enter spiritual life slowly, gradually. Spiritual life is like academic life. Every individual has a basic tattwa that carries over from birth to birth, and the individual always walks according to that principle. It takes a long time to recognize and know that fundamental tattwa.

I have tried many paths. I have studied Vedanta, introspected, steadfastly practised pranayama at Gangotri, got high on bhang and ganja, but nothing happened. When I contemplated upon those experiences of God that I have had, I realized that I was not the doer at all. He was everything. Then I sat down to sing bhajans on the glory of God, and I found my way.

This means that my original basic tendency was towards bhakti, towards devotion and surrender. I could not actualize that surrender because there was ego. The pride of belonging to a high-placed family, the pride of belonging to an upper caste, the pride of being educated, the pride of being the disciple of a well-known guru and the pride of being an intellectual. There were many kinds of pride and ego. That is the fact of the matter. Now I understand that

one does not actually have to do anything. He is already doing everything. The train is running and people are running inside it! There is no need to run. However, this thought did not strike me in the beginning. After a few experiences I realized that He is the doer and I am not.

What is the importance of a specific space?

Swami Sivananda: Here are some instructions on how to maintain a separate meditation room. Keep it under lock and key. Do not allow anyone to enter the room. Burn incense in the morning and evening. Keep a picture of Sri Krishna, Shiva, Sri Rama or Devi in the room. Place your asana in front of the picture. When you repeat the mantra the powerful vibrations set up by it will be lodged in the ether of the room – akashic records. In six months time you will feel peace and purity in the atmosphere of the room. There will be a peculiar magnetic aura there. You will actually feel this if you are sincere in your practice.

Whenever one's mind is much disturbed by antagonistic worldly influences, one can sit in the room and repeat the name of the Lord for at least half an hour. Then immediately one will find an entire change in the mind and feel the soothing spiritual influence. Nothing is so great as spiritual sadhana.

If the aspirant is a busy person and leads a travelling life, there is no need to have a special room or a special time for meditation but japa can be done wherever and whenever it is convenient.

What is the best way for a bhakta to use free time?

Swami Sivananda: If one has plenty of leisure and is not working dynamically, then a bit of 'positive' effort should counteract inertia. Free hours should be used in:

1. Studying life-inspiring books of Gandhi, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Sivananda, Aurobindo. Novels and newspapers not only waste time and money, they darken the future also by depriving one's willpower and dynamism of positive value.

2. Doing japa of one's ishta mantra and meditation on its hidden meaning, and upasana of the deity directly connected with the mantra.
3. Making positive and concrete determination for the business one is handling.
4. Writing the ishta mantra with love and concentration, so that the mind might obtain proper focus of ideals. Mantra writing is a perfect practical science of 'mental culture'.
5. Reviewing without any prejudice and partiality one's accomplishments and commitments which need reform and refinement. Criticizing, scrutinizing and analyzing one's motives and intentions.
6. In discussing matters not mundane and exciting with the family, in reading out a few passages from any great book and explaining them to others.

This will refill leisure and lazy hours with positive dynamism and bestow tranquillity of mind, richness of ideals, successful termination and a life full of hope, cheer, light and lightness.

In what way can one use the mind to develop bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: Having acquired a human body, the first aim is to find out, "Who am I and who is my Maker?" The purpose of human birth is only to know this. However, only thinking about it will not do. Contemplation clears some things, but there is no experience. For that, sadhana has to be practised, and the basis of sadhana is the mind and emotions. Faith and trust become the basis and the supports here, for although one has never seen God, one cannot say there is no God. One does not know if there is a God, yet it is accepted because people have said so. Therefore, faith and trust are necessary. Without faith and trust one would not even know that one's father is indeed one's father. One has to rely on faith and trust when there is no other way of knowing.

The first sadhana is of faith and trust. Through sadhana the mind is educated and trained. The first part of sadhana is ritual and worship. Ritual and worship, mantra repetition,

austerity and pilgrimage are all primary sadhanas. Once the body and mind are prepared through these, yoga sadhanas begin through which the mind is directly connected with the higher reality. The mind is the bridge between the devotee and God. If my mind is weak, the bridge is weak. The mind is the road that leads to God. The mind takes one very far down the road of sadhana. Through the mind one can attain a very high level in life. Austerities, meditation, worship, prayer and japa are all practised through the mind. When one listens to *katha*, stories from the scriptures, or satsang, it is through the mind that one takes them in.

What are the main principles in sadhana that a bhakta should follow?

Swami Satyananda: The main principle is to follow the path of spiritual life and let nature take its own course. Why worry about these things? Why be anxious about it? It is not necessary. Bhaktas should leave everything to the Divine. He does everything. He controls the thoughts, emotions, senses and everything else. Bhaktas think that they are doing everything but it is not true. They should know that they are the instrument and He is the doer, whoever He is and whatever His form.

Whatever one does or wants to do can become a sadhana provided it is offered to God. There are three main principles in sadhana. The first is absence of intellectualism. One should be innocent like a child. Secondly, sadhana should be done without the least expectation that it will bear any fruit. Lastly, it should be kept in mind that one is not doing the sadhana. The doer is God. One is only an instrument. There should not be the feeling that 'I am the doer'. People work as doctors, lawyers, priests, as business people. Whatever the work, they must have the feeling of dedication to God. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:27):

*Yatkaroshi yadashnaasi yajjuhoshi dadaasi yat;
Yattapasyasi kaunteya tatkurushva madarpanam.*

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you practise as austerity, O Arjuna, do it as an offering unto Me.

Tranquillity can be achieved by thinking that one is just an instrument in the hands of God who is the real doer of all one's actions. If a person considers himself the doer, then he will also think he is the beneficiary of the fruit of the actions, whether good or bad. A person does not become the doer just by his actions. If he goes on wishing for the fruit of the actions, he becomes the doer and suffers the consequences. There is a sense of ego in considering oneself to be the doer. One does not become the doer by doing one's job, nor does one become a non-doer by not doing any work. That is the subtlety of it! How can I be the doer when God Almighty is the doer? Intelligence is not the doer, as it is influenced by emotions and desires. Emotions are the fruit of desires and attachment. Intelligence is also influenced by human perceptions. Thus everything is influenced by everything else, so one should keep the mind uninfluenced, keep the senses uninfluenced, and most important of all keep the emotions uninfluenced.

What are the three attitudes a bhakta has to cultivate in life?

Swami Niranjanananda: Three attitudes have been given for a bhakta to identify with: *Satyam*, that which is truthful; *Shivam*, that which is always auspicious; and *Sundaram*, that which is always beautiful. By cultivating these three attitudes in the mind one will become a bhakta. In order to cultivate these three conditions of mind, one has to move through the nine stages of bhakti yoga, in which the first is satsang.

Satsang means becoming aware of something different to the usual, to the normal and making the effort to experience it. The change of one's thought process begins with satsang and until and unless there is satsang there is no change of thought process. Books do not give satsang.

Satsang gives an understanding of something beyond the conditioned perception, to make one aware of another possibility, and when one becomes aware of the other possibility and makes the effort to connect to it, then satsang becomes the first step into attaining this change and transformation.

The second attitude is to always have a positive attitude and a pious and happy disposition in life. I have made a Niranjan Challenge, which is: 'Can you remain happy for one day without getting any blue mood?' To be happy from morning to night, from the time one wakes up until the time one goes to bed is the challenge. To maintain one state of happiness, to avoid and shun disagreements, aggressions, envies and jealousies, to hold onto one feeling of happiness even when screaming at somebody is the challenge. One is screaming with a smile, not really frowning, for the moment one frowns the mood changes. Who can be angry in a state of happiness? Who can be efficient in the state of happiness? Who can be pleasant by maintaining that state of happiness?

The third attitude is channelling emotion away from the experiences of hatred, anger, arrogance, jealousy, passion and infatuation. It is leading emotion away from those attitudes and towards the peace and luminosity within. The connection with the negative or the association with the world lessens, and positive association develops. That is bhakti yoga. In Chapter 12 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna defines bhakti yoga not as devotion but as a state where there is no duality. There is a feeling of oneness, *adveshtha sarvabhootanaam*. There is no feeling of being a stranger; one is a friend to everyone. One who is compassionate, like Christ, and one who lives that compassion. One who is always happy and joyous and never frowns. In this manner a person who is endowed with the lightest and luminous qualities in life is the real bhakta – one who has perfected bhakti yoga. Bhakti yoga is the discovery of the pure Self inside.

What is the culmination of bhakti yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: To develop bhakti the bhakti yogis can read spiritual books which inspire them to discover themselves; practise kirtan, mantra, chanting; connect themselves with nature through a small havan. In that way, gradually they will cultivate understanding and love for the environment and people.

Bhakti yoga is not the yoga of devotion; that is a misconception. Bhakti yoga is the yoga to cultivate love in the heart. That love has to be selfless, not self-oriented. Selfless love connects one individual with another and a chain is created. When the chain is complete, one will realize that one loved God all the time. Cultivating love is the aim of bhakti yoga, not worship, devotion, ringing a bell, blowing a conch or placing a flower on the altar. They can become the medium to give insight into the experience of affection, love and respect that one can have for one's god, guru, or elders; however, the culmination of bhakti yoga is the flowering of love in the heart.



7

Divine Grace

Grace is the gentle cool breeze that revives you on a hot day.

—*Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*

DEFINING GRACE

How can God's grace be recognized?

Swami Sivananda: The Lord's grace can be seen in every inch of His creation. In the heat of summer one enjoys the delicious sweet grapes, cucumber, oranges and pomegranate and cool Ganga water of Rishikesh and Haridwar. This is the Lord's grace. Getting immediate relief from a serious ailment through herbs is the Lord's grace. When one walks in a dark night the stars twinkle and throw light on the path. This is the Lord's grace. When one is unable to bear extreme pain one becomes unconscious. This is the Lord's grace. When the weather is sultry, a gentle breeze blows and refreshes. This is the Lord's grace.

Does divine grace exist and if so what is it?

Swami Satyananda: Grace is an important factor in the practice of bhakti yoga. Inherent faith is responsible for the realization of grace. It is said that Nature is always benevolent, that the higher laws are always trying to help

man in every possible manner, but in his ignorance man violates these higher laws.

Buddha called it nirvana. The Jains call it kaivalya. Other great prophets called it grace. Grace is an experience, not a blessing. Grace means the vision of that Supreme Self. The vision of that Supreme Self is called grace, *anugraha*. It is not blessing, not benediction. Grace is the flow of light which comes out from within.

One is born through the grace of God and lives by the grace of God. It is by the grace of God that one starts thinking about spiritual life, about how to improve the quality of one's life in general. Only when one enters the furnace can one become gold. Sorrow and suffering are friends, not enemies. Happiness comes to destroy one. Spiritual seekers must understand that God is the only source, the only support.

What is grace and how it is obtained?

Swami Niranjanananda: Grace is attained through devotion and surrender, for with the awakening of devotion and surrender, the ego dissolves. One then experiences grace as the flow of divine energy. The three means by which one may attain the great kingdom of grace are surrender, simplicity and devotion.

What form does God's grace take?

Swami Satyananda: Sometimes I used to think that it does not matter whether God accepts and loves one or not. One just does one's duty. At other times I thought it is not like that. Someone who has God's love has everything. What is the form of God's love? The definition of God's love varies. A childless couple has a child. Problems before marriage are solved. An incurable disease is cured. People accept these instances as God's grace.

What are the four types of grace?

Swami Sivananda: Through self-surrender the devotee experiences the reality of divine grace and the Lord's readiness

to help and support him at all times. The divine influence streams into his being and moulds it into a fit medium for divine realization and instrumentality. Surrender and grace are interrelated. Surrender draws down grace, and grace makes the surrender complete. Surrender starts the purification of the heart and grace completes it. Without grace, complete unification is not possible. Grace divinizes one's being so that the constant flow of inspiration can be received and retained. Through divine grace alone, one's whole being is galvanized and rejuvenated. The sages speak of four types of grace:

1. *Ishwara kripa*, the grace of God: When the flame of aspiration is kindled in the heart of an aspirant, it is said that he has received the grace of God. He has been as if chosen by God to follow the blessed path that will exalt him to divine consciousness.
2. *Atma kripa*, the grace of one's own self: When an aspirant pursues the spiritual path with tenacity and perseverance, it is said that he has received the grace of his own self, as if his innermost self is permitting him to keep his spiritual resolve.
3. *Guru kripa*, the grace of the spiritual preceptor: When an aspirant pursuing the spiritual path is able to withstand temptations and overcome obstacles in a miraculous manner, it is said that he has received the grace of his spiritual preceptor. He has become sensitive to his guru's spiritual influence.
4. *Shastra kripa*, the grace of the scriptures: When an aspirant, while studying the scriptures, is able to understand their subtle meanings as if the scriptures are disclosing their secrets to him, it is said that he has received the grace of the scriptures.

These different types of grace are mutually interdependent. In fact, *ishwara kripa* is the sole reality behind the other types of grace. The sages have emphasized God's grace as the one and only ruling force of the entire existence, and that it is impossible to advance on the spiritual path without

grace. The divine plan creates the spiritual path that leads an aspirant towards self-realization. However, all spiritual paths reveal their secrets under the influence of a spiritual guide.

Why is grace important to a bhakta?

Swami Satyananda: The most precious thing that humankind needs today is God's grace. Nothing is possible without divine grace. It is only by grace that a person can become something and achieve things. Happiness, sorrow, disease, poverty are all part of life. Grace means something different. Sri Rama, Sri Krishna and the saints had to face suffering, and they accepted it. However, God's grace is the one thing that, if it is there, is present in every situation. Wherever there is grace in any work, in any house, in any family, there is always happiness and peace. That is why the ancient rishis and munis found the way to obtain grace.

How can bhakti be developed?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti does not depend on destiny or on horoscopes. It does not depend on anyone but Him. If He wants to, He will give that intense love. Bhakti can only be gained by the grace of God, not from the scriptures or by any practice. No method exists to attain *para bhakti*, the highest bhakti. Going on pilgrimages, visiting temples, fasting, having satsang with the guru and doing pooja will awaken mild bhakti and one will begin to feel good, but it will not be para bhakti.

In what way do challenges in life allow the experience of grace?

Swami Satyananda: When you are in turmoil, when the scales are heavily loaded against you, and when you are in utter dejection, at that time your spirit opens and unfolds itself to you. That is called grace in Christianity, the grace of God, Divinity, the higher being, the Spirit, which unfolds itself unto you. You begin to see grace in such forms as bliss,

ecstasy, blessings, kindness. At that time, you come in touch with people who have the spirit developed in them. The moment you come in touch with these people you begin to relate yourself with them. You are not able to relate with your spirit, yet you are able to relate yourself to the spirit which is highly developed, and when you are able to relate yourself with this spirit then spiritual development starts in you.

In your experience, is it possible to earn divine grace and what is the relationship between self-effort and divine grace?

Swami Satyananda: I will tell you my personal philosophy. I have worked hard all my life – when I was a student, when I was a sannyasin in the ashram, when I was a parivrajaka and even when I am supposed to be the founder of so many movements, but I have come to the conclusion that it is not my efforts that have borne fruit. It is not only my belief – I know it! I know that it is not my efforts that have borne fruit, and at the same time I also do not believe that it is my destiny that things have happened. I have come to the conclusion that I have become the medium of *anugraha*, grace. I have clear evidence of that.

First of all, I did not want to do many things which are happening today. I had not the least ambition in life. The only ambition I had was to have a small hut, sit down and not talk to anyone, read the *Bhagavad Gita*, Upanishads, Tantra, Vedas and meditate. No work, no ashram, no guru and no disciples. I tried my level best to avoid these things, and the more I tried to avoid them the more they came to me. Money is something I never wanted as I was sure that a man like me could always live without money. Money is necessary when one has superfluous desires, but if one just wants to live one doesn't need money. I tried my level best not to involve myself in anything. For eight to ten years I moved all over India, Burma, Afghanistan, Ceylon, just for the sake of wandering. In many places I was offered ashrams, monasteries, buildings, money, but I just left those places the next day.

In July 1963, in the early morning in Munger, I woke up internally. It was a clear inner awakening and I had certain visions. It was a living experience, as if I were seeing and talking to a real person. That was an inner awakening. I woke up within myself and had a whole process of experiences. I was given a command and I followed it a little bit. In 1967, I became fed up and decided to leave. The same night, again the same inner awakening took place. Since then I have completely resigned myself to that inner voice. I call it the command of my guru, *guru ajna*, and the instructions are clear.

If it is true that grace can do anything and everything, then why is it necessary to work? The only answer is if one does not work, what is one going to do? This mischievous monkey mind will completely kill a person. It will drive him crazy and he will become abnormal. I work and I ask everyone to work, not because the work will give good results. Everybody has to do karma yoga. Here is a story to illustrate this.

Once a guru gave a disciple a mantra, and when the disciple perfected that mantra, a spirit appeared and said, "I am the fulfilment of your mantra." When the disciple asked him what he wanted, the spirit said, "Give me some work." The disciple told him to build a house and it was done in a trice. The spirit asked for more work and the disciple told him to plough and sow the fields. When that was done the spirit demanded more work, so the disciple told him to clean the kitchen, which was finished in half an hour. Now the poor man had no more work to give the spirit, who threatened to kill him.

The disciple went back to his guru and said, "Guruji, you gave me the mantra and the spirit manifested but now he is going to take my life." The guru asked why and the disciple told him the spirit wanted work. The guru said, "Oh, that's nothing. Just ask him to erect a pole, give him a tin of oil or wax, ask him to pour it on the pole, rub it, and climb up and down. Tell him to keep on rubbing it."

That is what most people are doing. One who is tamasic by nature keeps the tamasic mind occupied with tamasic activities. A rajasic person involves himself in rajasic activities to keep the rajasic mind in order. If a person is sattwic, he has a sattwic mind and involves himself in sattwic activities like satsang, japa and kirtan to keep the sattwic ego occupied. When the mind is properly occupied, sometimes by ambition, desires, passion or greed, sometimes by renunciation or penance, sometimes by generosity or charity, sometimes by stealing and killing, then one is free, but it does not give what grace can give.

It should be remembered that efforts must be made for years, according to whether the mind is sattwic, rajasic or tamasic. The mind must be kept occupied with whatever it likes – *kama*, desire, *krodha*, anger, *lobha*, greed, *tyaga*, renouncing. At the same time, the role of anugraha or grace in one's life must be accepted and then the psychological and emotional problems of life will be diminished.

What is divine grace and how can it be experienced?

Swami Satyananda: Grace is a higher law or the law of higher Nature. It is present everywhere, in everybody, and in order to experience this grace one has to open one's mind, heart and spirit. The greatest obstacle in the experience of grace is one's limited ego. Human beings are guided mostly by ego. When one loses one's innocence, one loses the touch with grace. Only one person is happy: he who has no ego, he who is innocent, he who has a very simple heart, because such a person is in direct contact with the transcendental grace.

Grace is not like a beam of light. Grace is not something which comes to you. Grace is not far from you. It is closer than your breath, it is closer than your own mind. It is so close to you that you cannot even think about it, you cannot even understand it.

In fact, you exist because of grace. Not only you, but your earth which is suspended in space exists just by the grace of a

higher Nature. But how to experience it? I do not think and I do not believe that people have experienced grace. Once you have experienced grace you have no fear. Those people who realize grace in their lives become fearless.

What will happen to my son? What will happen to my wife and husband? What will happen if I have no money? What will happen if I do this and I will be criticized? These kinds of thoughts come to one who has no faith, and therefore, no grace. Do not talk about grace, instead, try to feel it. Try to become like a child, without taboos, without prejudice, without definitions, without categories. Try to be spontaneous in your expressions, actions and feelings. Then, if you can experience that grace even for a split second, you will become a different person.

RECEIVING GRACE

How is divine grace obtained?

Swami Sivananda: Those devotees who have dedicated themselves to the Lord, who are ever harmonious and self-abiding, who are ever devout and who adore Him with intense love not for attaining any selfish purpose, obtain divine grace. The Lord gives them wisdom or the yoga of discrimination or understanding by which they attain the knowledge of the Self. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it says (10:10):

*Teshaam satatayuktaanaam bhajataam preetipoorvakam;
Dadaami buddhiyogam tam yena maamupayaanti te.*

To those who are ever steadfast, worshipping Me with love, I give the yoga of discrimination by which they come to me.

The Lord bestows on those devotees who have fixed their thought on Him alone ‘devotion or right knowledge’, or *buddhi yoga*, by which they know Him in essence. They know through the eye of intuition in deep meditation the Supreme Lord, the One in all, the Self of all, as their own Self, devoid

of all limitations. *Buddhi* is the inner eye of intuition by which the magnificent experience of oneness is had.

The aspirant should surrender to the Lord totally and not keep any secret desires for silent gratification. Desire and egoism are the two chief obstacles that stand in the way of self-surrender. They must be killed ruthlessly. Devotees should run to the Lord for shelter to free themselves from the troubles, afflictions and sorrows of samsara, and take the Lord as their sole refuge. By His grace, supreme peace will be obtained and the supreme, eternal abode attained.

An objector says that the Lord has love and hatred as He confers His grace on His devotees only and not on others. The answer is no. The Lord is impartial and is beyond love and hatred. His grace flows towards all, and the devotee receives it freely as he has opened his heart to receive His grace. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:28), it says:

*Shubhaashubhaphalairavam mokshyase karmabandhanaih;
Sannyasayogayuktaatmaa vimukto maamupaishyasi.*

Thus shalt thou be free from the bonds of actions yielding good and evil fruits; with the mind steadfast in the yoga of renunciation and liberated, thou shalt come unto Me.

How can one obtain divine grace?

Swami Niranjanananda: Divine grace will only be experienced if one becomes dear and friendly with one's own inner spirit. The mind is the barrier which does not allow one to experience that grace. After all, one has the capacity to be happy, so why does one feel pain and suffering? Why does one identify with it? When one cannot identify and connect with happiness, how can you ever think of realizing divine grace? It remains a distant reality in one's life.

People say they are searching for divine grace and subject themselves to temporary satisfaction, temporary happiness, temporary conflict, temporary confusion, everything that is temporary. If they want to change into new clothes, they

have to remove the clothes they are wearing first. Therefore, first they have to remove everything that they are wearing and become naked. They should know what they are. Just as people can see their naked body in the mirror, they should be able to see their naked mind, their intellect naked without any covering, without any material or social identifications. Then they can clothe themselves in the clothes of divine grace, but first they have to become naked.

The process of becoming naked is the process of purification. Purifying oneself one step at a time, one will discover that divine grace was never far. One is unable to feel it due to the coverings on the body. One could not feel the warmth of the sun on the skin, yet that does not mean that the sun was not there; it is shining all the time. By removing the layers one feels the rays of the sun touching the body. That is the grace by which one is surrounded all the time. Where does one find air to breathe? Nowhere and everywhere. One is surrounded by it. Just as air is universal, divine grace is universal. To be a recipient, one has to remove the trappings and coverings of ego, of expectation and materialistic behaviour, sensuous and sensorial behaviour. Discover the peace and harmony inside and one will discover that grace is always there. Nothing more than that.

How can one receive God's blessings?

Swami Satyananda: Whether it is called *kripa*, *ashirvad* or *anugraha*, in essence it is the same. There is no sense in worrying. One should establish the connection with God daily and seek His blessings. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna says (18:62):

*Tameva sharanam gachchha sarvabhaavena bhaaratata;
Tatprasaadaatparaam shaantim sthaanam praapsyasi
shaashvatam.*

Seek refuge in Him alone, O Arjuna, with all your heart and faith.

By His grace only, can you gain supreme peace and the eternal abode.

Every householder should sit down twice a day, morning and evening as a rule, and formulate a system whereby he can connect with God. He should bathe at a fixed time and then plug into God. At that time he is neither doctor nor lawyer, king nor prime minister, man nor woman. For those ten minutes he is totally naked, with no other identity. One has to become naked before God. After that one can work and fulfil one's worldly responsibilities.

God's grace flows towards everybody. God's blessings are for everyone. When it is raining, one person may leave an empty glass outside to collect the water, and another a corked bottle. What can the falling water do? It will continue raining regardless. Similarly, God's words and blessings are pouring down everywhere, but the mind needs to be opened more. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:46):

*Yaavaanartha udapaane sarvatah samplutodake;
Taavaansarveshu vedeshu braahmanasya vijaanatah.*

To the brahmana who has known the Self, all the Vedas are as useful as a reservoir of water when there is a flood everywhere.

The attainment of devotion to God depends upon one's capacity. To be worthy of God's grace, one must become aware of His grace. God's grace is always there. His grace falls on everybody at all times, but people do not realize it.

What attitude does the devotee need to develop in order to receive God's grace?

Swami Sivananda: The devotee must have faith that divine grace always descends when the time is ripe. If he feels there is a delay in the descent of divine light and grace, he should not give up the struggle. It is difficult to say when and how divine grace will descend. One should be equipped with the

necessary qualifications and make oneself fit for the company of the Divine. If one realizes the Lord's company and willingly surrenders his whole being to the divine teachings, the question of salvation is solved. In the final chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna presents Arjuna with His most supreme teaching (18:66):

*Sarvadharmānparityajya maamekam śaranam vraja;
Aham tvā sarvapaāpebhyo mokṣayishyāmi maa śuṅchah.*

Abandoning all duties, take refuge in Me (God) alone:
I will liberate you from all sins; grieve not.

This is a powerful mantra which will help the devotee to effect total self-surrender if he constantly keeps before his mind the feeling 'I surrender myself to God'. Those who repeat this with feeling will soon receive the grace of the Lord and be able to accomplish perfect self-surrender. The grace of the Lord cannot come to one who thinks and speaks of his own ability. God's grace descends on the humble soul, who upholds that God does everything and knows that he is only an instrument in His hands.

Do grace and self-effort have equal parts to play, or is one more significant than the other?

Swami Niranjanananda: Self-effort is the first step in the experience of grace. Grace is a state of fulfilment where one is in tune with the will of the divine and the divine will guides the life of the aspirant. In order to come to that level where grace is manifesting, one has to tune one's own nature to be the recipient of divine grace. In order to be the recipient, one has to go through self-effort.

Sadhana is the aspect of self-effort. Practice, awareness and application are the three aspects of effort. With them, one can reach a state of harmony within and then begin to realize that divine grace controls one's whole life and destiny. Initially, one may lack the ability to flow with life. In one's quest for contentment, satisfaction, fulfilment and

enjoyment, one struggles with life. Teaching the aspirant how not to struggle and how to flow is the aim of every spiritual tradition in the world. Whether it is eastern or western it does not really matter.

People have become self-centred. They have become self-oriented. They identify with ambitions, aspirations, likes and dislikes. As long as that self-oriented identification is there, how are they going to accept the validity of divine grace? At this level it is only an intellectual or even conceptual process. They can think about it yet they cannot know it, they cannot experience it. Grace has to be experienced. It is not something to think about. Effort is to be made as the first stage in the process of experiencing grace.

What effort does one need to put in to receive grace?

Swami Niranjanananda: There needs to be an effort, a sankalpa, to change one's life, to remove the defects and shortcomings and bring in excellence. Once excellence comes into life, once life is infused with positive qualities, positive thoughts, actions and behaviour, one becomes the recipient of God's grace.

Sri Swami Satyananda says that people go to gurus, temples and religious places in the hope of finding grace. People pray to God, "God, please remove my suffering." They pray and come back and don't find the grace, as they are not willing to change their life. They expect miracles in life. Nothing is achieved by praying unless one makes the effort to bring a change into one's life. Until one brings about a change in one's behaviour, actions and thoughts, one should not expect to receive God's grace, for God helps those who help themselves. He supports those who are eager to improve their lives.

Those who do not want to change their lives can go and pray every day, but God will say, "What is the point? You want a miracle in your life, but you do not want to change your life. You do not want to change your thinking, your samskaras, your actions, your behaviour, so what will you

do with my blessings? Even if a miracle comes into your life, you will reject it.” That is why the sages say, “Practise all that you wish to practise. Whether you wish to pray in temples or perform other rituals, go right ahead, yet try to acquire excellence in the knowledge that you are receiving and learning. That is when you will receive the grace and compassion of God, not otherwise.”

A farmer first clears the land, removes the thorns and weeds, breaks up the hard earth and makes it soft, removes the stones, prepares beds and then sows the seeds. One has to handle life in the same way. One wants to sow seeds in the hard earth of the mind and heart. Their present state is not suitable for cultivation. The earth has not been cleared from within, the thorns are continuing to grow, the rocks and stones are continuing to cause obstructions. One has not ploughed the earth yet one wants positive qualities to grow and blossom. This is like sprinkling seeds on untilled land. The seeds will not sprout, no matter how good or plentiful they are. Until and unless the seeds find the appropriate environment, they will not sprout. They will lie on the surface of the ground for a few days and then dry up. They will not serve any purpose. Therefore, when one enters into spiritual life and wants to advance in it, the first attempt should be to till the inner land, remove the weeds, rocks and thorns, and prepare it for the sowing of positive samskaras. This requires effort, sadhana and sankalpa.

How can one remove samskaras that block grace?

Swami Satyananda: Samskaras from many births will vanish or subside only with God’s grace. Without God’s grace nothing can be done. When God’s grace is there, the rubbish of life is removed instantly, just as darkness is removed by the first rays of the sun. However long a person works at removing his rubbish, it cannot be done. It is ego to think one can remove one’s own rubbish. One has to have the discrimination to know what is true and what is false, what is rubbish and what is not. Sometimes the diamonds

may be thrown away instead of the stone because one does not know the difference. Therefore, one should leave it to God and attain His grace through prayer, remembrance and satsang. Satsang is most important to overhaul old samskaras.

Whatever I have received was through God's grace, not my own. It has been said in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutra 38):

Mukhyatastu mahatkripayaiva bhagavatkripaaleshaadvaa.

Success in devotion is attained mainly by the grace of great men, or through a slight measure of divine grace.

Whatever success I have had, whatever I have achieved in spiritual life, was not due to my personal effort or diligence. It was because of God's grace.

That which is eternal has been given by the Lord only. It is difficult to tread the spiritual path because it is the inner path. When the mind soars high in inner life, the path is uncharted, and one does not know which way to go. Therefore, it is ultimately *prabhu kripa*, the grace of God.

Without God's grace, my life would have been different. His grace is needed and in order to receive His grace one has to be innocent like a child, not an intellectual giant. A small child plays with dolls, marries it one day to another doll, thinking that is reality. When childlike innocence is developed, things start to happen.

How can bhaktas ensure they are worthy to receive divine grace?

Swami Satyananda: It was through the grace of Christ that I was able to hoist the flag of yoga in so many Christian nations. When there is grace, the lame are able to climb mountains, the dumb begin to speak, the deaf to hear, the blind to see, and a pauper can become a king. I was born in a farmer's family, but there is not a country or city I did not take yoga to. This does not happen through one's own strength.

No matter how weak a person is, no matter what family he is born into, whether he is attached to desires like Surdas, whether he runs after a woman like Tulsidas, once the grace of God descends, iron turns into gold, coal into diamonds, Tulsi into Tulsidas and the blind into Surdas.

To receive God's grace, however, His home should be kept clean. To make God dwell in one's heart, to ensure He remains there and gives His blessings, it is essential to clean one's heart. It is difficult to explain the meaning of cleaning the heart. How would one know that the heart is clean? Ramakrishna Paramahansa used to say, where there is dirt, flies come; where there is wealth, thieves come; but if there is a beautiful garden with a lake, blooming lotuses and chirping birds, everyone comes. Similarly, one can tell what kind of a heart one has by the people one attracts.

Why is the path of bhakti smooth?

Swami Satyananda: There will be obstacles on any path of yoga taken up. In the various types of sadhana mentioned in the Vedas and tantras, in agama and nigama, there are hurdles. The only sadhana path that is free of obstacles is the path of bhakti. Bhakti is inspired and sustained by God Himself. It is attained only by the grace of God. It is prasad from God Himself. One comes to bhakti by God's wish, by His blessing. One loves Him, is drawn to Him, becomes attached to Him only when and as He wishes. Therefore, when bhakti is His gift, His wish, how can there be an obstacle?

Why is surrender the key to receiving divine grace?

Swami Sivananda: When the individual soul surrenders to the Lord, he comes entirely under the Lord's influence and protection. He is not affected by maya. All differences are wiped out. When the impurities in the mind are removed, the devotee recognizes that there is no difference between him and the Lord. Then the divine grace descends. The grace may appear as the guru. The grace may come in the

form of concentration, serenity, devotion, or the vision of the Lord.

The Lord is not partial to anybody. His grace is available to all without any distinction. It is the Lord's grace that drives a person to seek a guru and to attain perfection.

God-realization becomes natural and easy when a person willingly surrenders his whole being to the inflow of divine grace. The ignorant person impedes the path of grace by his conceit, arrogance and egoism. Just as a river loses its name and form after it has entered the ocean, so also a devotee loses his individuality when he merges himself in the Lord. The mind that causes distinction is annihilated by devotion.

The Lord's grace will descend in proportion to the degree of surrender; the more the surrender, the more the grace. The *Kathopanishad* says in a thundering voice (1:2:23):

Naayamaatmaa pravachanena labhyo na medhayaa na bahunaa shrutena;

Yamevaisha vrinute tena labhya-stasyaisha atmaa vivrinute tanoom svaam.

Not by study or discourses, not by argument, not by intelligence is the Self attained.

He whom the Lord chooses attains Self-realization. He reveals Himself to such a chosen person.

What is the meaning of guru's grace? Why it is said that one can be liberated only by the grace of the guru?

Swami Niranjanananda: Grace is the outcome of the connection between two people, just as love, empathy and closeness are the outcome of the connection between two people. In spiritual life, when one goes on a journey of self-discovery, when one has to transform or transcend the limiting nature of the personality, one does not do it alone, but with the help of some other force. If one has to travel from one country to another, one does not do it entirely alone. One relies on some mode of transport, such as an aeroplane, a train

or a car. Similarly, what is called 'grace' is the outcome of the connection, understanding, love, trust or faith that one person places in another person.

When the aspirant sincerely places faith and trust in God, he wholeheartedly believes that in times of trouble he shall be guided. Due to that faith and conviction, in difficult times he is able to find a solution which helps to tide him over the problem in a gentle and smooth way. This can be attributed to divine grace, to the connection with God that is felt deeply. God becomes the guide, God becomes the friend, God becomes the philosopher, God becomes the support, encouragement and strength. When one is able to give this much to God, then one becomes the recipient of God's grace. It is the reciprocation of God's feelings towards the aspirant.

It is the same with the guru. One comes to someone believing that this person will help, so there is an intellectual, emotional or maybe even a spiritual connection right from the beginning. Then one develops that connection. This connection does not remain only external, it becomes deeper and deeper. One begins to love the guru and the guru begins to love the aspirant. One begins to place one's faith and trust in the guru, and the guru begins to place his trust and faith in the aspirant. Whatever one gives one hundred percent, one receives one hundred percent. That intimate connection is grace. Grace is never one-sided.

This is my experience, because when I reflect on my relationship with my guru, I can frankly say that I can definitely feel his love every moment of the day. I can feel his connection with me. I am sure it is also vice versa, that wherever he is, he is also able to experience my deep connection and deep feelings for him.

When the love and faith are shared in equal intensity, the combination becomes grace. It is this connection and relationship that becomes the force of inspiration, support and motivation. When one is in deep states of sadhana, in an unknown, uncharted dimension of consciousness and

does not know what to do, suddenly guidance comes. One is guided as this connection does not recognize distances and boundaries. Rather that force becomes alive within and one exists within that force.

In order to explain this *sambandh*, this relationship, the term God's grace or guru's grace is used. Analyzing it in relation to one's feelings, affection, thoughts, one's mind and life, it can be seen as a reciprocal arrangement: what one gives is what one receives. There is no use thinking, "I will get guru's grace," or "I will get divine grace, God will help me." It does not happen like that. What can happen is that one gives oneself first and then that other force will manifest within. Therefore, grace does not appear until and unless one surrenders totally and there is a complete letting go of the inhibitions, complexes and identities that bind one to this realm.

If one wants to experience how fire burns, one has to throw something into it, yet once it is done, one will not get it back in the same form. If one throws a piece of paper into the fire, all one will get back are the ashes. If one throws oneself into the fire, one will not come back with the same body. One will be burnt and the fire within the body will become alive. Similarly, with grace, if one gives love, submerges oneself in it, one will receive something back. If one gives faith and trust, submerges oneself in it, one will get something back. Grace is what one is able to give and what one is able to receive. That is my understanding and experience.

Does sadhana help one to obtain grace?

Swami Satyananda: Sadhana does not work here. Sadhana is necessary for the human body, mind and emotions. Asana, pranayama and meditation are necessary for a balanced life. However, where awareness of God, continuous remembrance of Him, and realization of the divine light are concerned, these will happen only if He wants it. If He does not want it, it will not happen, even if one works for hundreds and

hundreds of years. It is only through the grace of God that one finds God. I do not know how to attract God's grace. One has to find that out for oneself.

What is the spiritual benefit in doing sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: Do not sit idle and say, "The Lord's grace will do everything for me. Why should I do any sadhana?" This is the wrong philosophy. God helps those who help themselves. God's grace will descend only on those who exert themselves. An aspirant cannot expect the Lord to do self-surrender for him. Be up and doing, strive, plod and persevere. The Lord will shower His grace upon the devotee. It is the Lord only who stirs the aspirants to exert themselves.

The subtle forms of lust, anger, egoism and pride can only be totally destroyed through the grace of the Lord. However hard one may strive and do sadhana, these subtle forms cannot be eradicated by sadhana alone. The Lord's grace completely purifies the heart.

Mira renounced her kingdom, her husband, relatives, friends and property. She remembered Sri Krishna the whole day and night. She shed tears of divine love and sang His praises with single-minded devotion. She gave up food and her body became emaciated. Her mind was ever absorbed in Sri Krishna. Only then did Sri Krishna shower His grace upon her.

So that people will not become idle and say, "The Lord will do everything for me. Why should I do any sadhana? I depend upon His grace alone," Rishi Vasishtha and others have preached self-effort, but in reality it is the Lord's grace only. Not even a leaf or an atom will move without the sanction of the Lord.

What is the relationship between self-effort and grace?

Swami Sivananda: Self-effort is certainly necessary. The aspirant will soon realize that he can do nothing by himself and that God-realization can only be attained through the grace of the great ones, through even a little grace of

the Lord. Even a moment's contact or satsang with saints and sages is highly beneficial. Satsang destroys worldly attachments, desires and cravings. Bhakti cannot be cultivated without association with saints. Divine grace can be obtained through the grace of mahatmas or great souls.

Self-effort is possible only through divine grace. Divine grace comes automatically as a result of good actions, devotion and self-surrender. When the ego is annihilated or effaced, the obstruction to the flow of divine grace is removed and it flows freely.

The guru will appear only through the grace of the Lord. He transmutes his power to the disciple through look, touch or sankalpa. The Lord alone appears as a guru. The guru acts under the guidance of the Lord.

Vedantins are in favour of self-effort, while the followers of the path of bhakti always advocate the doctrine of divine grace. Bhaktas say that self-effort is necessary for self-purification and for enabling grace to manifest itself. An extreme school of bhakti says that even self-effort is made possible only by the Lord's grace.

Why is everyone not saved by the Lord's grace? The Lord has given through His grace free will to everyone to choose between good and evil. He must, therefore, wait until a person turns to Him of his own accord. As man is endowed with a free will, God will wait to see man's predilection for Him.

The doctrine of free will and the doctrine of grace can be satisfactorily reconciled. Some explain that the law of karma is an aspect of grace, as the Lord would otherwise be interfering with the individual's freedom. The Lord does not want to free the individual soul to do anything against its own likes and dislikes. Others say that grace is only an aspect of karma. Good acts such as devotion and self-surrender produce their result, namely, the grace of God under the law of karma. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (6:14):

*Prashaantaatmaa vigatabheerbrahmachaarivrate sthitah;
Manah samyamya machchitto yukta aaseeta matparah.*

This divine illusion of Mine, caused by the qualities, is hard to pierce; they who come to Me cross over this illusion.

Even a drop of grace is quite sufficient to free oneself from the trammels of this samsara. It is through the grace of the Lord alone that a person can stick to the spiritual path and break all sorts of ties and attachments.

Mahat kripa, the grace of the great ones, is also necessary. There is no difference between God and a realized Bhagavata. They are identical. There is no hope of overhauling the old vicious samskaras of a worldly person without the help of satsang with mahatmas or great souls. Satsang is a safe boat to take the aspirant to the other shore of fearlessness, the shore which is beyond darkness. The glory of satsang is vividly eulogized in the *Bhagavata*, *Ramayana* and other scriptures. Books written by realized persons constitute secondary satsang. One who studies them is in holy communion with the authors.

Grace will descend only on those aspirants who are earnestly struggling on the path and are thirsting for realization. Nowadays people want to lead lives of ease and expect the grace of mahatmas. They do not want to do any kind of tapas or sadhana. They want a magic pill to put them in samadhi at once. They want worldly comforts and realization in one and the same cup.

How important is satsang in experiencing grace?

Swami Satyananda: In order to obtain God's blessings, one has to spare some time for Him. One thing is sure, God's grace comes as His gift; it is dependent on His will and cannot be acquired through one's own efforts. To always feel in tune with Him, it is necessary to expose oneself to satsang from time to time. The first sadhana is satsang, where there is talk about God, about spiritual life or where there is singing of bhajan and kirtan. This helps one to purify oneself and one's inner environment. Satsang must be com-

patible with one's inner environment. Everything is written in the scriptures. Without satsang, discrimination cannot be developed. Without the Lord's grace, one does not get an opportunity for satsang.

How can a devotee who has received God's grace be recognized?

Swami Sivananda: When the devotee obtains the grace of the Lord, his intellect is calm and tranquil. The outgoing energies become transmuted into spiritual energy. He gets help and strength from mantra shakti, sadhana shakti and upasana shakti. Sattwa flows from the feet of the Lord towards his mind. All desires melt away. *Vikshepa shakti*, the power of maya, is destroyed. He has the firm, unshakable conviction that real happiness is in God. His mind is always turned inward and withdrawn from objects, *antarmukha vritti*. The senses do not wander about, but become absorbed in the mind, and the mind becomes absorbed in God. He is ever peaceful and enjoys the happiness within. He delights in the bliss of God. He, therefore, stands adamant even amidst grave troubles and calamities. Rishi Narada uses the expressions *stabdho bhavati*, the devotee becomes serene, and *atmaaramo bhavati*, happy in the bliss of the Self.

The devotee experiences divine intoxication. Gouranga was so intoxicated with the divine nectar of prem that sometimes he did not know when it was daybreak and when it was night. Mirabai, though a young princess, danced in the streets amidst men, even men of inferior class, on account of this intoxication of Krishna prem. Ramakrishna Paramahansa remained in the thick jungle for four days without taking any food when he was under this divine intoxication. Words can hardly describe the nature of this divine intoxication. One has to feel it oneself. Even mild intoxication gives immense strength to the devotee to face difficulties in the battle of life.

Can you describe an incident when you received grace?

Swami Niranjanananda: I had an experience of divine grace, when I was just a child. Maybe I was four or five at that time. I remember having a fever so high that the doctors had given up hope of my survival. I remember the acute pain in my body and the delirium, and I vaguely recall my mother sitting beside my bed and saying, “Just pray to God and guru.” I looked at her and there were tears in her eyes, as if she felt that I was counting my last breaths.

She sat beside my bed the whole night doing her mantra, and every few minutes she would tell me to repeat or call out Sri Swami Satyananda’s name. I do not know when I went to sleep. I had a peculiar dream that I was trying to run from something, however, my feet were glued to the floor. No matter how hard I tried I could not move my body. Something or somebody was chasing me and I was trying desperately to get away.

A figure of light appeared. Some words passed between the figure and the entity chasing me. Then I remember a nice warm sensation coming over my body and the figure saying, “You have nothing to fear now.” The fever which I had, which was about 40.5–41°C and increasing, began to drop and become normal within the span of about one hour. I consider that an experience which happened due to the grace of the Divine.

Why should one invoke grace?

Swami Niranjanananda: The best sankalpa that one can ever make in life is to invoke divine grace. People want health and wealth, and it is needed; however, without grace it has no meaning and no purpose. If one has grace, then whether one has health or whether one has wealth, grace is filling one’s life. There is nothing left to attain anymore.

Sri Swami Satyananda made the Sat Chandi Mahayajna the medium to attain that grace. People don’t have to ask for promotion, for health, for wealth, for succour in life; no, they just have to ask, “your grace.”

If a high-up person or a chief minister accepts an invitation, then before the arrival other people come and prepare everything. If the road is bad they prepare the road. If the land is barren, they plant trees and bushes to make the area look beautiful. In the same manner, if one asks for grace, it is like the highest coming, so everything has to become just right and appropriate. If there is sincerity, purity, intensity, then definitely grace will descend.

ULTIMATE FORCE FOR SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION

What is the relationship between destiny, karma and grace?

Swami Satyananda: Everyone has a fate, a destiny. It can be given different names, but it becomes the basis for the pain and pleasure that has to be undergone. It is responsible for poverty or riches, hope or despair. No one strives for sorrow, misery or pain. No one makes an effort to live in poverty or sickness. Everyone strives for a happy, healthy and prosperous life, and yet fails to obtain it. It proves that there is something beyond human effort, which may be called *prarabdha karma*, the karma determining one's present life. Is *prarabdha karma* or destiny dependent on *purushartha*, self-effort? Are man's achievements the outcome of his destiny or *purushartha*? The seers say that when God's grace is received, there is no need for *purushartha*.

Destiny and *purushartha* are both useless in the face of God's grace. According to seers and sages, receiving that grace requires complete faith in God. If faith in God is so deep that one submerges oneself fully in Him, then sorrow is transformed into happiness. Despair goes and hope comes. Sorrow and pain are like day and night. They come and go, continually changing their positions like a rotating wheel. Therefore, changes in one's life exist to experience God's grace, the ultimate divine grace. Everyone must try to obtain it. Divine grace is the ultimate answer to all problems.

Does being a servant of God relate to free will or grace?

Swami Satyananda: As far as ordinary karmas go, there is a possibility of free will, but the relationship with God can never be attained through free will. It only comes with grace. Genuine faith and conviction do not come through intellectual argument, but by the grace of God. One is free to consider oneself as His servant, but is there the same attitude as a servant who cleans the pots, washes the clothes, cuts the grass, tends the children and cleans the toilet? One calls oneself His servant, but the mentality is like that of a master. The master and servant relationship can come only when God so wills it. The saints and sages emphasize this point again and again.

Suppose a person is on a boat in the middle of an ocean and all around him there are three metre waves, crocodiles and sharks. “Oh God,” he cries, “save me from the ocean of samsara.” Everyone is in the middle of an ocean and no one knows where the shore is. People are in midstream, neither at this shore nor the other, and they are helpless. However, the problem is that even though a person is helpless he does not feel himself to be so. He thinks that he can do something and no matter how he tries to subjugate his ego, the ‘I’ still pops up: “Don’t worry, I can do it.” This ‘I’ comes between God and man; therefore, every religion has suggested total humility, submission and absence of ego. “I am nothing, my Lord, Thy will be done.” This “Thy will be done” means grace. It is the ultimate reality.

When grace flows does it change the destiny of the devotee?

Swami Satyananda: Man has only one resource available to change destiny, and that is the grace of God. Once he is able to stir God’s grace, his destiny changes. The bandit becomes a saint, the pauper becomes a king and the blind shows the world the way, like Surdas, who gave the eye of wisdom to the world. The best way to receive God’s grace is to go peacefully to the place where there is satsang, where God’s bhajans

and kirtans are being chanted. Here one will receive God's blessings in abundance.

To know what is beyond name and form, beyond the senses and intellect, the simplest and easiest path is to think about others. If one helps one's fellow beings even a little, God will most certainly shower His grace, because to worship others is to worship God.

What is the power of God's grace?

Swami Satyananda: Whatever success I have achieved in spiritual life has not been due to my personal effort or diligence. It has been due to God's grace. If I had not had God's grace, my life would not have been like this. How could an ordinary person like me, a man with limited knowledge, means and intellect, do and say all this? Only through divine will. God's will is operating. Through this process of realization, when the ego begins to diminish, one may not see God, but one certainly begins to perceive the divine will. Once one sees the divine will, then one knows that one has come slightly closer to God. The distance remains, but it will diminish by and by, kilometre by kilometre. One day the gap will close and one will merge with God.

How does one find the right path?

Swami Satyananda: Each individual has a path according to his evolution, capacity and ability. If a child wants to climb the fence, he will need the help of his mother, but if an adult wants to climb, he won't need the help of his mother. In the same way, you have your path with God and I have mine. If I take your path, I am likely to have difficulties, but I do not question your belief. God has given everything. There is nothing which He has not given. He has provided me with everything, more than I deserve. I did not deserve His grace, but He gave it to me. I did not deserve such good health, but He gave it to me. He has given me everything, whether material or spiritual.

I have to find my path, and that is what I was doing for more than half a century. Ultimately I have found that I am His servant; I am a tool in His hands. He can ask me to do anything. A knife can be used for an operation, for cutting or chopping vegetables, and for slicing off someone's head. Let Him do whatever He likes. Sant Namdev says:

The Name is Rama and Rama is the Name.
You are the Master and I am the servant,
Hari is the ocean and we are the waves.
Where can the servant go, leaving the Master?
Hari is the tree which shades birds like us;
The servant loses himself by remembering Hari.
Sant Namdev says he obtained Hari by this method.
Rama pervades the universe; He is everywhere.

The form of grace varies from person to person, especially for mundane people who are suffering from their worldly sorrows. They do not have the willpower to bear this sorrow. What if that man does not get a son? It is a big shock for him. He badly wants a son, so he goes on breaking his head against God's image. These things cannot be explained to people, because they are swaying on their swing of happiness and misery. Each one has his own desires, which are most important to him.

How does innocence allow the experience of grace?

Swami Niranjanananda: Logic is the main barrier in life. The desire that somebody should become one's guru, the desire that one should become a disciple, is intellectual. Becoming the disciple of somebody is a decision which has been taken knowingly based on one's intellect. Intellect is the main cause of failure in life. People fail for they do not allow grace to possess their body and mind.

As long as there is intellect, innocence cannot manifest. If one makes an attempt to manifest that innocence in life, one will be recognized as a hypocrite, for one is unable to feel the presence of the shakti which guru has infused in you. Christ

said in the Bible, “In order to enter the kingdom of heaven you have to be innocent like a child.”

What attitude should one have to receive God’s grace?

Swami Satyananda: When the grace of God descends, avail yourself of this divine and sacred opportunity.

Are there examples of people who have received God’s grace?

Swami Satyananda: One has to be a light unto oneself. It is no use knocking at anyone’s door. The most innocent person, who does not know the ABC of spiritual training, can have realization at any time if he wishes. No qualifications are required. One does not have to be truthful, celibate or sincere. One does not have to be Christian or Hindu, or wear a sacred thread.

Darshan of God can be had by anyone, anytime, anywhere. For God’s grace, one does not have to qualify oneself. Many great, truthful, honest and pure people have missed the bus. Sri Rama says in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Uttarakanda, after doha 85, chau 1 to 4):

*Aba sunu parama bimala mama baanee,
Satya sugama nigamaadi bakhaanee.
Nija siddhaanta sunaavau tohee,
Sunu mana dharu saba taji bhaju mohee.
Mama maayaa sambhava samsaaraa,
Jeeva charaachara bibidhi prakaraa.
Saba mama priya saba mama upajaae,
Saba te adhika manuja mohi bhaae.
Tinha maha dvija dvija maha shrutidhaaree,
Tinha mahu nigama dharama anusaaree.
Tinha maha priya birakta puni gyaanee,
Gyaanihu te ati priya bigyaanee.
Tinha te puni mohi priya nija daasaa,
Jehi gati mori na doosari aasaa.
Puni puni satya kahau tohi paahee,
Mohi sevaka sama priya kou naahee.*

Now, listen to what I say,
 Which is highly pure, true and simple,
 As has been described in the Vedas.
 I am telling you of my principles.
 Listen and bear them in mind.
 And remember me, abandoning all else.
 This world has been created by my illusion,
 Along with all the beings, sentient and insentient.
 They are all of different categories.
 Among them are the twice born,
 And among the twice born
 Are those who know the Vedas.
 Among them also are those who live
 According to the Vedas and dharma.
 Even among those who are detached and wise,
 The specially wise are dearer to me.
 But my servants, who have no hope
 Except in me, are dearest to me.
 I tell you truly, again and again,
 That no one is dearer to me than my devotees. (1–4)

The Lord's grace is easy to receive, but so far in history only the very innocent people like Mirabai, Christ, Raidas, Ramakrishna Paramahansa have obtained it. Christ was not an intellectual. When one becomes simple-hearted like a child, then one will receive God's grace. One who thinks that becoming a tyagi, a tapasvi, being charitable and dharmic is the way to God may find they are wrong.

Firstly, God can be reached only by love; there is no other way. Secondly, it must be remembered that God will meet the aspirant only if He wishes, not by the aspirant's wish. God is approachable only through love and devotion. He will reveal Himself only if He wants to, not because one has tried all the methods. It has been said in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Aranyakanda, after doha 32, chau 1):

*Komala chita ati deenadayaalaa,
Kaarana binu raghunaatha kripaalaa.*

Rama is so soft-hearted
And kind to the poor,
That He shows mercy
Even without being asked for it.

There is no method. All the methods written about in the Bible, the *Bhagavad Gita* and Upanishads are just given because something has to be done. However, actually, nothing except bhakti is necessary in order to find God. It is said in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Aranyakanda after doha 32, chau 1):

*Kahahu kavana prabhu kai asi reetee,
Sevaka para mamataa aru preetee.*

Say, what is the nature of the Lord
That He has so much affection
And love for His servants?

What is the relationship between grace, destiny and evolution?

Swami Satyananda: Human birth is valuable in that the consciousness undergoes many pains to evolve through so many species and births in order to evolve to this state. One must ensure that one's evolution does not stop, or that one does not set up a process of involution in one's consciousness. One obtains this human consciousness with great luck, by God's grace. Human birth is not accessible even to the gods. It must be used in such a way that one's evolution is furthered and not start a process of involution.

Most people accept themselves as God's bhaktas. It is up to the aspirant to find out the way. This is the ideal path. Once man begins to be in the company of God, he rids himself of karmas accumulated through many lives. Then he receives the grace of God without even asking for it. What happens when he receives this grace? Well, that is difficult for me to say as yet. I will tell you when I receive it.

8

The Age of Bhakti

The times are changing. The winter of materialism is going and the spring of bhakti is coming.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

KIRTAN IN KALI YUGA

What sadhana was prescribed for the four yugas?

Swami Sivananda: In Satya Yuga meditation was prescribed as the principal form of discipline, for the minds of people were generally pure and free from distractions. In Treta Yuga sacrifices were prescribed, as materials for the performance of yajnas were easily procurable then, and as people were slightly rajasic. In Dwapara Yuga worship was recommended as the principal form of sadhana, as there was greater facility for direct worship of God, and as there was a greater manifestation of the sportive energy of God.

In Kali Yuga, as the minds of people are naturally prone to greater distractions, meditation, worship and performance of sacrifices are not possible. Therefore, loud chanting of the divine name, kirtan or *naam smarana*, remembrance of the Lord's name, has been recommended as the principal sadhana for God-realization.

What makes bhakti a superior path to other forms of yoga in the Kali Yuga?

Swami Satyananda: God's name, bhajan and kirtan are left for the 21st century, because no one can perform yajna, not even saints and sages. Saints and sages of this era also belong to society; they have not come from heaven. It must be understood that the saints and sages of today cannot do penance as they did in the times of old. After just one day of fasting, they start complaining of gastric acidity! If their head aches even a little, they call for the doctor. The qualities of asceticism are not present.

In this age, renunciation, penance, fasting and yoga are not suitable paths to reach God; only faith in God and remembering His name can help. If one lacks faith and belief, one cannot approach God. In the *Ramacharitamanas*, Tulsidas has also said (Uttarakand, after doha 129, chau 3):

*Ehim kalikaala na saadhana doojaa,
Joga jagya japa tapa brata poojaa.
Raaamahi sumiria gaaia raamahi,
Santata sunia raama guna graamahi.*

In Kali Yuga there is no need of yoga,
Yajna, japa, austerity, fasting or worship.
The only dependable means is faith
And remembrance of the name of Lord Rama.

What sadhana will enable one to attain God in Kali Yuga?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Satya Yuga, people had to do *tapas*, penance, for thousands of years to gain a glimpse of God. This is written in the Puranas, scriptures and historical accounts. In Kali Yuga there is no need to do *tapas* for thousands of years. God appears during the average lifespan of a human being, one does not need to wait for ten thousand years. There is no need for penance, austerities or *tapas*. God Himself has assured us that in Kali Yuga only one sadhana is enough to attain God and that is *naam smarana*, remembrance of God's name. Repeat God's name, and when

the connection is made, then one day the electric current will flow and light the bulb automatically. This is the power of God's name in the Kali Yuga.

Why has it been said that kirtan is important in this age?

Swami Sivananda: Kirtan or sankirtan yoga is the easiest, surest, quickest, safest, cheapest and best way for attaining God-realization in this age. Most people cannot practise severe austerities nowadays. They do not have the strength of will to practise hatha yoga. They cannot maintain perfect lifelong celibacy. They do not have the prerequisites for raja yoga. They are not endowed with the keen intellect necessary for jnana yoga or vedantic sadhana, however, *sankirtan yoga*, or the yoga of singing the Lord's names, is within the reach of all.

This is the easiest of all modes of approach to God. In Kali Yuga, the Iron Age, kirtan alone is the best yoga. This is the prescribed method of devotion for this age. The mind is ever intent upon singing the Lord's names and glories and it has no occasion to take interest in things of the world. Day and night the devotee feels the presence of God and thins out his ego. He becomes sattwic and pure at heart.

Great divine persons like Narada, Valmiki and Sukadeva, in ancient times, Gouranga, Nanak, Tulsidas, Surdas, in comparatively recent times, have attained perfection through kirtan bhakti alone. Even the great sinner Ajamila crossed the ocean of samsara by repetition of the Lord's name. Japa and kirtan are the most potent methods of realizing God in this Kali Yuga.

Music has become universal. People in the East and West are influenced by music and this generation is redirecting music towards God. The entire society, the entire psyche, is being influenced. Music now has to be channelled towards God, and it is being done by singing kirtan, bhajans, sankirtan and prayers. There are many forms of music. Music is part of nada yoga, the yoga of sound. *Nada* means the flow of sound vibrations. There is a particular sound

which is imperceptible; it is there, but cannot be grasped or heard externally. That sound is called *anahad nada*. It is a sound which is beyond sound. Anahad nada is the basis of all sound. The sound exists in eternity, then it manifests in time, then in space. When it manifests in space, it is heard. Kabirdas has said:

Remove the veil from your face,
Then only will your lover meet you.
The Master is omnipresent in every atom,
So never speak harsh words.
A light burns in the palace of your body,
But do not move from your asana.
Kabir says to the saints,
The anahad drum is being played upon.

What is your vision for kirtan in the 21st century?

Swami Satyananda: Dance, music and sankirtan will dominate the 21st century. There will be metropolitan sankirtan, cruise sankirtan, forest sankirtan, mountain sankirtan, temple sankirtan, and the style of kirtan will differ according to the time of day. This kirtan knowledge will emerge in the course of time. In bygone centuries there were a thousand forms of sankirtan, but over time many were unfortunately lost. The singing of God's name is a science which India has perfected over thousands of years. The pioneers of sankirtan in this country were Mirabai, Sant Haridas and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Many great saints have emphasized singing God's name in rhythm.

The sound of sankirtan will ring in the atmosphere. Renowned singers and musicians will step into kirtan for the joy and ecstasy derived from devotional music cannot be found elsewhere. Two objectives will automatically be served in this way. Firstly, the standard of music will be reformed and improved. Secondly, those who find the spiritual path difficult will find it easy through bhakti. Therefore, everyone must sing kirtan.

The 21st century will be the century of bhakti yoga, not raja yoga or hatha yoga. Bhakti yoga is the practice of directing one's mind towards God: sing His name, hear His name, write His name, draw His picture, talk about Him and live with people who talk about Him. Bhakti yoga frees one from tension and high blood pressure. It makes one immensely happy; this experience cannot be imagined, nor can it come from anything else in this world. The point of singing God's name is divine intoxication. Therefore, the children should be prepared for kirtan and bhakti; the young stars should be prepared for bhakti yoga. Tulsidas says in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Balakanda, after doha 20, chau 3 to 4):

*Sumiria naama roopa binu dekhe,
Aavata hridaya saneha biseshe.
Naama roopa gati akatha kahaanee,
Samujhata sukhada na parati bakhaanee.
Aguna saguna bicha naama susaakhee,
Ubhaya prabodhaka chatura dubhaashee.
Raama naama manideepa dharu jeeha deharee dvaara,
Tulasee bheetara baaherahu jau chaahasi ujjaara.*

If one remembers the name, even without seeing the form,
Love flashes in the heart spontaneously.
The mystery of name and form is beyond words.
It is delightful if understood, but words cannot express it.
The name is a bridge between manifest and unmanifest.
It is an efficient interpreter, revealing the truth of both.
If you have a desire to enlighten the inner and outer
apartments,
Tulsidas advises you to keep the jewelled lamp
Of the name of Rama on the tongue.
For that is the doorway between the inner and outer self.

Why is music such a good sadhana for people of the Kali Yuga?

Swami Satyananda: In my time people were of a different nature. Just like the hook is used to catch fish, people were

hooked by yoga. The times are changing and people are being hooked by devotion. As people are crazy about music, the yoga of the next generation will be *naam sankirtan*, singing God's name. Everyone listens to music whenever they have the opportunity; there is definitely no fun in living without music. Even death is no fun without music. The time of bhakti and naam sankirtan has come!

In this Kali Yuga the mahatmas have proclaimed sankirtan to be the best available means for establishing a connection, a relationship with God. People should choose a particular day of the week, like Sunday, Monday or new moon day, to sit together in a group and do sankirtan. Even at home, if all the family members are inclined, they can sit together and sing sankirtan for ten or fifteen minutes. Children like kirtan and can easily be included. They pick up sankirtan quickly as they are pliable and this is the best period to mould them.

How did the yoga movement of the 20th century influence the awakening of bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: The keynote of the 21st century will be bhakti. The bhakti movement will take us by storm. Yoga was responsible for weaning people from the material to the transcendental world. The yoga movement ushered in the spiritual awakening at large. Had yoga not been revived, humanity would never have turned to spirituality. Yoga has completed its mission successfully. Hatha yoga, asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha and other yogic practices proved extremely useful in bringing humanity to the path of bhakti.

What is the role of kirtan in the 21st century?

Swami Satyananda: A new consciousness is emerging, not only in India but also worldwide. It is catching up with the religions and societies of the world. What is this rage? It is naam sankirtan, which is the highest form of bhakti. There is a wise dictum:

*Harinaam, Harinaam, Harinaam kevalam
Kalau nastyeva nastyeva nastyeva gatiranyatha.*

The word *kalau* means ‘in Kali Yuga’ and *Harinaam* means ‘God’s name’. *Harinaam* is repeated three times to give the required emphasis. There is no other alternative, no better means to reach God than singing His name. Only a few people can practise dhyana yoga, japa yoga or go on pilgrimages. The ethical values such as satya, ahimsa, asteya and brahmacharya remain bookish codes of conduct, as it is practically impossible for the majority of people to practise them. There is a way out. One can pick up sankirtan and continue it at home. If one cannot do it at home, one can join a group and do sankirtan with them weekly.

Bhoga, enjoyment, is the dominant aspect of contemporary civilization, but self-restraint should form its basis. In the 21st century bhakti yoga will provide a common platform between bhoga and self-restraint. Kirtan should be sung with a pure heart and without any artificiality. Sheikh Farid says:

Farid advises that one should call God
As the guard of the field loudly calls.
This call should be continued until the body,
Like the crop, is completely ripened.

It is my dream that just as people have taken an interest in yoga, they will take an interest in kirtan. In this Kali Yuga, kirtan is as good as medicine.

What can be done to inspire the next generation to follow the path of bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: There is nothing one can do for the present generation, but one can try to inspire the future generation to take a new direction. One should set one’s children on the path of bhakti. One does not have to tell them to get married and become householders because this is a natural drive. One does not have to tell them to eat; they will eat because it is a natural drive. One has to teach them

how to devote more time to God, how to be spiritual, how to make some time in the morning and evening for sadhana, for remembering God, for singing kirtan. People all over the world, irrespective of nationality, culture, colour and creed, will enjoy singing God's name on a family or community basis.

What is the best sadhana for the Age of Bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: According to all revelations, the best sadhana for the future generations and the coming age is repetition of God's name. Few people are practising kriya yoga, but what about the thousands and thousands of masses? As it is said in the Bible, Koran and other scriptures, people must remember and sing God's name while observing devotion for Him. This practice will bring good results to the practitioner and to others as well. This is going to be the greatest yoga, the common yoga.

There has always been the yoga for the few, the privileged ones, the yoga teachers and acharyas. Everybody cannot do higher practices. It has been said that the people in the coming age will become restless, greedy, passionate, and they will not find peace in anything, but if they practise repetition of the Lord's name, they will find peace.

BHAKTI AND SCIENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

How will bhakti yoga and science help the new generation?

Swami Satyananda: When the child is born handicapped, it is said to be due to his karma, but if he has not done any karma in this life, how can he receive the fruits of his action? To say, "I have seen my past births," is not enough to establish the point, because people born today have a new attitude. A new generation is being born into a new chaotic world in which parents have no control over their children's samskaras. They are exposed to an upbringing in which haphazard thoughts occupy their minds; their thinking is anarchical. In such a situation, I think that a new social

constitution has to be established in which there is nothing that the new generation can question.

Instead, the social set-up should be such that they ask themselves questions such as, “If rebirth is not true, then how did this happen?” They should ask such questions because the future generation will accept facts only in the presence of subjective and objective evidence. They will only believe if substantial evidence is provided.

Nowadays we have a shortage of mahatmas who can provide subjective proof. Those who can give objective evidence are the scientists, the present-day rishis. But these seers do not venture into the subjective direction; they say that matter is ultimate. For this reason, it is important that in the 21st century, scientists turn their experiments, investigations and observations inward.

We have to find a way to direct their attention towards subtle planes. The only way to do it is by working on the faithless people who are devoid of trust, agnostics, believers of classical thought, lost in the pleasures of materialism. They have to be initiated into metaphysical realms. Unless we direct them onto this path, the scientific community will continue to experiment with matter alone, which it has been doing all these years. Experiments have been carried out in chemistry, electronics, physics, genetics, and the results are there for us all to see.

The scientists are the rishis. Rishi Kanada formulated the atomic theory and he denied the authority of God. He said that atoms and molecules are the ultimate. Therefore, his name was Kanada – *Yah Parama Dadati-Kanada*. You can call it Kana theory or particle theory. *Kana* means particle; it is a theory of the particle. Buddha negated God, Mahavir negated God. They both said the world was originally fluid and that it solidified very slowly. This has become a theory of spiritual evolution. Many philosophers have negated God and rebirth. Some were very powerful philosophers. Kanada was one of them. Mahavir was a great philosopher. Jabali Rishi was also very powerful and he denied the established beliefs.

A scientist is one who goes deep into any event and comes out with facts. The experiments conducted in the 21st century will be on the spiritual path and will have bhakti as their basis. I can see clearly that bhakti will form the basis because in western countries, where a lot of scientific experiments take place, there is great interest. People in the West are very much inclined towards the path of bhakti. The path of bhakti means faith and trust. The basis of bhakti is trust.

Does kirtan help to purify the environment?

Swami Sivananda: When there is a congregational prayer, when devotees meet together and do kirtan and common meditation, they generate a spiritual current or force which inspires and purifies the hearts of many. The whole atmosphere of that place is purified and is charged with currents of divine love.

The scriptures say, “Holy is the family and blessed the mother, nay, the earth itself is fortunate through him whose mind is absorbed in the Supreme Brahman, the ocean of infinite knowledge and bliss.”

If all do kirtan daily the whole atmosphere will be purified. There will be abundant rain and abundant crops. In olden days there was kirtan in every house, and so there were good rains and good food. Even this little food on earth is due to the kirtan done by some devotees. Had it not been for this the whole world would have perished by this time on account of severe famine. If one really wants peace and plenty, then by kirtan, one can purify the atmosphere and propitiate Lord Hari. Sankirtan is the bestower of eternal bliss, immortality and abundant food which helps one to do His worship, meditation and attain the goal of life.

What do you foresee as the future of science?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti yoga will be the science of the 21st century, and for this, the scientists have already done a great deal of preparation. Technology has been the outcome of

science in the 20th century. Devotion will be the outcome of science in the next century. The scientists have worked on technology, the principles of materialism and electronics. They have given us some beautiful and miraculous things. In the next century, scientists will turn their eyes towards bhakti, and they will conduct research into the human psyche in the same way that they are doing research on matter, electronics or nuclear physics in this century.

In future, they will work on faith, belief and devotion. They will discover the impact of devotion on the human mind, behaviour and constitution, and its effect on society and civilization.

How will scientists and intellectuals accept bhakti as a relevant expression for this modern, intellectual and scientific era?

Swami Satyananda: The next generation is going to get scientific proof of bhakti, not religious evidence. What is said in the *Ramayana* is all legendary evidence. It is not scientific. No religious book is scientific evidence. When you say that the moon is so many miles from the earth, there is scientific evidence provided today through objective data, and the means to prove it.

In the same way, we will see the renaissance of dharma and bhakti. Your children and grandchildren will say, “Papa, do you know what bhakti is? In school we learned that a great scientist from America says that bhakti has an important influence on biological matter, and that he has measured this with different instruments. So, you must love God like you love your wife or child.” You will say, “This child has gone crazy!” “I am not crazy; I am talking science. You people are all superstitious!” The time is going to come soon for redefining bhakti as a part of our personal lives and as a method of redemption from pain.

Lumbago is not the only pain that man suffers from, neither is arthritis. It is true that pain is there, as is acidity or humidity, but there are many other problems in the human

mind, consciousness and psyche. If you were to search for an individual cure for all of these problems, the whole life would be spent. However, there is a common cure for them all in bhakti. Therefore, you must practise kirtan, have satsang, and read the lives of great saints, whoever they may be: Mirabai, Ramakrishna, Saint Francis, Aurobindo, Saint Teresa of Avila or Saint John of the Cross. Read the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, and just try to live like that, but do not make bhakti a religion or a sect.

This will take time to develop, because the intellectual mind is a hard nut to crack. Therefore, a devotee should not take recourse to vain discussions. Aurobindo himself has said: "Reason was the helper, and reason is the barrier. Transcend reason." So, intellect was the helper, intellect is the barrier, transcend the intellect. In the *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, bhakti and the fruit of the state of bhakti have been described as follows (sutras 4 to 6):

Yallabdhva pumaan siddhi bhavati amrito bhavati tripto bhavati.

Yatpraapya na kinchidvanchati na shochati na dveshti na ramate notsahi bhavati.

Yajjnatva matto bhavati stabdho bhavayatmaramo bhavati.

On attaining supreme love one becomes perfect, immortal and fully satisfied. (4)

Attaining this divine love he does not desire anything else, neither does he grieve over any loss or death of dear ones, nor does he hate anything; he does not indulge in sensual pleasures, nor does he feel any urge for the acquisition of material things. (5)

Knowing this man becomes intoxicated, peaceful and completely immersed in enjoying the bliss of the atman. (6)

The 21st century will be the century of bhakti yoga for everyone, even for scientific researchers. Those scientists who

have been working in fields such as biology, physiology and physics will work on bhakti. What is the impact of bhakti on human behaviour? What is the impact of bhakti on the human body? What is the effect of bhakti on universal consciousness? Scientists have been working within the dimension of matter, now they will work on human emotions, for emotions are more powerful than matter. By human emotions I mean feelings. Bhakti is a feeling, it is a deep feeling of the heart towards God. Just as you have a deep feeling of terror, passion, enmity or hatred, in the same way, there is a deep feeling of true love for God.

If bhakti is devotion towards God, how can it also be a science?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti is definitely a science. Bhakti brings about a transformation in awareness, like a chemical change. It causes a metamorphosis in a person's thoughts, actions and mind, as well as in his reactions, responses and lifestyle. These changes can be seen and experienced. Those who reached the ultimate stage of bhakti, like Mirabai, Kabir and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, have told us one common truth: that bhakti is divine energy, transcendental love. It is not the ordinary emotion of love, it is supreme love.

When your mind is fully submerged in something, when it merges itself unconditionally into something, it becomes one with that object of love. When you turn your love towards God, the mind begins to lose itself in God. It slowly becomes one with God and the chasm between the devotee and God begins to narrow down.

The second point is that in the 21st century people will be as scientifically-minded as they were in the 20th century. Scientists will work, not only in education, but on many other fronts. God-realized saints on one side and scientists on the other will have to work together. Bhakti is a science which can transform the individual and change his thinking pattern. The generation of the 21st century will belong to the bhakti yoga culture because humankind has developed

its feelings and emotions during the present era and these expressed feelings have to be redirected or streamlined.

How will the scientific research of the 21st century differ from that of the 20th century?

Swami Satyananda: The 20th century was the century of political culture. Politicians were at the forefront of every matter. Even if a church was built, politicians were at the forefront. People have understood that the political culture will never save humanity, it will never solve social problems, it will never bring an end to war.

In the 21st century the scientists will change their focus. They will work on feeling, emotion, devotion and bhakti. Research will be streamlined. It has already started to happen in many countries. What is bhakti? What are the effects of bhakti on the electro-magnetic waves of the human brain? How does bhakti influence the enzymes? How does bhakti improve or bring deterioration to the cardiovascular system?

Scientists will prove the superiority of mind and emotions over matter. The 21st century will see this. There are many things which the 20th century has missed that the 21st century will pick up. And if it misses them, disaster will follow because man has become powerful. He has so much technological knowledge that he has the power to destroy himself.

How will devotion be researched?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti means devotion or love, pure love. Love will become prominent, not as a belief, but as a science. After all, one may not know what antibiotics are, but they have been researched and defined. In psychology, research has been done on brainwaves. Likewise, scientists will be doing research on someone like Mirabai. What changes took place in her body? How do you ascertain them? What waves were predominant in her brain? Were they beta, alpha, theta or delta? Or were they something else? Scientists will find

these things out. They will have to discover the principles of sadhana.

Mirabai was given poison, but it did not affect her. How did that happen? Christ was crucified, yet he did not die. How did he remain alive? They hammered nails through his palms and feet and speared the side of his body. He was not a vigorous man; he was a type of ascetic sadhu, yet he lived through that ordeal!

When scientists acknowledge the positive effects of devotion on the human body and mind, will there be a revival of religion?

Swami Satyananda: In the 21st century scientists will turn their attention towards bhakti and they will conduct research into the human psyche in the same way that they did research on matter, electronics, nuclear physics, computers and satellites in the 20th century. Technology was the outcome of science. Bhakti will be the outcome of science in the new millennium.

It is clear that the scientists of the 21st century will have to work very hard. Spiritual discipline will not be known as religion or faith, but as a science of life. Just as we have been able to deal with space communication through electronic mediums, similarly we will have to deal with the idiosyncrasies of humanity, with its complicated mind and its strange behaviour, which I do not think science is able to control.

Nobody has control over the human mind and behaviour today. This should develop when scientists realize that things are going wrong. Once they start to think about it, there will be a revival of religion. But which religion should be revived? The religion which is based on logic and reasoning and which has a pragmatic approach. Scientists will give up experiments on matter and will work on the influence of devotion to God and its effects on the chemistry, behaviour and experience of the human body and mind. It will be a wonderful thing and it will happen. This is the inevitable destiny of humankind in the new millennium.

How will a bhakta's faith and trust be scientifically researched?

Swami Satyananda: The foremost attributes on the path of bhakti are trust and faith. Bhakti is an emotional quality. Faith and trust belong to the psychological personality. Their effects can be measured in terms of electromagnetic radiations. What is the effect of faith and trust on blood pressure and metabolism? Faith and trust are personal. How can they be measured if they cannot be seen?

We cannot see faith or belief, but I can feel mine and you can feel yours. However, that is not enough. Objective data needs to be produced. Trust and faith are the basis of bhakti and cannot be seen with the eyes. What is that faith? Is it a blood flow or a current of electromagnetic radiation? What is the form of *bhavana*, feeling? Is it a vibration or a flow? It is a feeling and it definitely exists, because when you are angry, you hate. The feeling of anger disturbs the heart and blood pressure. You lose your appetite and the liver function is impaired. In many people worries and anxieties cause their eyesight to become weak.

This means that the effect of bhavana or feeling on the human body is tangible. Although you cannot see faith or trust, the effects can be felt on the body. Therefore, you can know the cause through the effect. Scientists won't investigate the soul, the spirit, *atma*, because they say it does not exist, but they can certainly research feelings, faith and trust.

What will be the relationship between science and religion in the bhakti era?

Swami Satyananda: Earlier people used to think of yoga as a religion and reject it, but science has recognized its worth and accepted it. Ayurveda is slowly being accepted because ayurveda is based on nature. Although its techniques are chemical techniques, they concern the nature of the gunas. Ayurveda is of a high quality, but now it has the label of the Hindu religion on it. There should be no label of religion on any science or politics because science and politics are

not concerned with religion. Is biology Christian? Is physics Christian? Science has no relationship with religion.

Due to violence and injustice in the world, people are becoming despondent. Will research on bhakti help to uplift and inspire society?

Swami Satyananda: The basis of progress is the internal culture of humanity, and that culture has been destroyed. The 20th century belonged to the politicians and materialistic scientists. It was not the century of a spiritually-oriented people or culture. We saw and were shown the importance of politicians and scientists. Now we have realized that they have given us absolutely nothing. They did not help the poor. There is no denying the fact that they have not been able to remove poverty.

In the 21st century their hold on society will be reduced and people will be motivated more and more towards bhakti. Even scientists will cooperate in that process. Scientists will help because they have realized that whatever research they have carried out has been misused for the destruction of humanity.

Who will lead the bhakti movement?

Swami Satyananda: The preliminary groundwork will have to be done by a number of people who have realized this divinity in their own lives. That will be the first step. The 20th century did not have such people with the capacity to inspire others to lead a divine life. There were many preachers who spoke about God, but unless God is in you and works through you, that is not enough.

If you plant a mango tree today, it is going to fructify after ten or fifteen years. When you produce an idea or a philosophy today, it may not have any relevance in your times. A man is judged as great by posterity, after many generations. The next generation, the little children and their children, will ask, "What is the definition of God?" Just as they asked in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (1:1):

*Harih Om brahmavaadino vadanti –
Kim kaaranam brahma kutah sma jaataa
Jivaamakena dva cha sampratishthaa;
Adhisthitaah kena sukhetareshu
Vartaamahe brahmavido vyavasthaam.*

O knower of Brahma,
Who is Brahma, the cause of this world?
Where have we taken our birth?
Through whom are we living?
And in whom are we established?
Under whose control do we live our life
In happiness and in sorrow?

In the next generation, bhakti and dharma will become relevant. Only two communities can contribute constructively: sannyasins and sages, and research scientists. Neither politicians nor industrialists can promote dharma and bhakti. Only saints, mahatmas and scientists are capable of this.

SAFEGUARD BHAKTI!

How does the understanding of God need to change?

Swami Satyananda: God exists in many forms, from the microbe to the towering tree, from the limited mind to the universal mind. God is the person who needs help, God is the animal that needs protection. A complete idea of bhakti has to emerge in such a way that society will be regenerated and people will enjoy life.

How has bhakti yoga been understood by different people?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti yoga is the yoga of love and devotion. It is devotion to the Divine, in whatever form, or non-form one cares to see Him or Her. It can be devotion to truth, God, the supreme, Brahman, the absolute reality or any other name given to the ineffable. It can be devotion to Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, Rama, Hanuman, Mahavira, Shakti, Shiva, Vishnu, Kali, Durga, Ahura Mazda

or Zeus. One can express devotion to any form regarded as divinity incarnated. It can be a great saint, whether dead or alive. It can be a guru. Without this devotion, whether great or small, it is impossible to practise bhakti yoga.

Bhakti can easily be labelled blind dogma and in many cases it has degenerated into exactly this. In the past and in the present day, bhakti has been totally misunderstood and misused. This has led to fanaticism and intolerance. This is not what bhakti is all about. Bhakti is not something that is easily acceptable to the modern intellectual world. This is a great pity, for bhakti yoga is an incredibly powerful method that can lead to higher knowledge and transcendence. Not only this, bhakti yoga can help one to harmonize one's life and make life the joy that it should be. People have seen the misuse and corruption of bhakti and have mistaken this for the essence of bhakti yoga.

Many people would have once laughed and walked away from a person talking about bhakti. It is amazing how people change, but the change does not come through mere blind acceptance, rather through greater understanding and realization of the deeper significance of bhakti yoga.

Many great yogis, if not all, expressed bhakti. This was either their path or bhakti came as a result of other paths. Some of them could not stop talking about bhakti. These great yogis were clear indicators and examples of what the path of bhakti yoga brings: tolerance, peace, understanding, love of one's fellow beings and many other attributes. It is to these people that one should look if one wants to see clear proof of the benefits of bhakti yoga, not those who become bigots and fanatics.

How can one transcend dogmatism and fanaticism on the path towards bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: The problem with bhakti yoga is that it can easily lead to blind dogmatism combined with the fanatical enforcement of one's beliefs on others. This is not bhakti yoga. Throughout history, bhakti yoga has been

totally misunderstood and misapplied. Bhakti yoga is the path of love and devotion, yet it has often tended to develop along the path of dogmatism and fanaticism. This is exactly the opposite of bhakti yoga. On the path of bhakti yoga one can devote oneself to a specific form of divinity, any form of one's choice, it does not matter, but at the same time there has to be tolerance of any other form of divinity worshipped by other people. Tolerance lies at the core of bhakti yoga.

At first bhakti yoga involves focusing one's whole attention on the object of worship or love. This is the stage where bhakti can easily become intolerant and corrupted. This narrow-mindedness automatically disappears when one's devotion leads to expanded awareness and spontaneous bhakti arises from the depths of the heart. One realizes an underlying essence behind all individual deities and comes to a point of understanding where these forms are accepted as divinity. This is the paradox that one must understand for oneself.

It is only in the early stages that bhakti can seem to be a form of indoctrination; this is not the purpose of bhakti yoga. The aim is to reach states beyond indoctrination. The aim of bhakti yoga is to lead to something that removes indoctrination and concepts, and leads to perfect freedom of being. One should not repeat the errors of history and corrupt bhakti yoga by making it sectarian and narrow. The aim is much higher than dogmatism, fanaticism and indoctrination. The aim is knowledge and bliss. Bhakti yoga is the means and bhakti is the experience.

What is causing the resurgence of bhakti around the world?

Swami Satyananda: Wherever there is an excess of worldly pleasure and materialistic aspirations, people have developed a feeling of distaste. The 20th century has only shown us a culture of indulgence and enjoyment, a utilitarian, consumer culture. This culture plays a dominant role in literature, music, art and drama. This century has given

us no path advocating spirituality. Great people like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramtirtha and Ramakrishna Paramahansa have somehow kept it alive by injecting inspiration into it. That is why spirituality has survived the onslaught of stark materialism.

Scientists think that enough is enough. They find that most of the discoveries and inventions are being misused and are destroying the whole world. People are being misled and spoilt. Enjoyment is necessary, there is no doubt about it, but too much indulgence automatically generates distaste.

The age of bhakti is dawning. Bhakti is a force. It will influence the culture and relationships of humankind. If you study history, you will find that there have been revolutions brought about to promote awareness of bhakti. These were the times when society was going through a transition period and a feeling of instability prevailed everywhere. It happened in India as well as in Europe. Whenever a society passes through a transition period, it experiences a social vacuum, and people begin to reject it.

When a society becomes dissatisfied with its own state of affairs, that situation is known as a social vacuum. This has already happened in the western developed societies, but they fail to understand this. Therefore, they are turning towards spirituality.

In the 20th century people suffered because of the emphasis on *bhoga*, materialism, pleasure, enjoyment. This century did not support bhakti; it supported politics, materialism and the fulfilment of petty desires. You want to own a bicycle, a motorcycle or a car – that is all you have been thinking about. International peace can only be achieved if every human being and every family is peaceful. If everybody lights one candle, all the candles will be kindled.

In the 21st century bhakti will be supported by society and by scientists. The same scientists who have been experimenting on matter, physics, nuclear physics and other sciences will conduct experiments on bhakti and kirtan.

Your children will sing even against your wishes, because the times are changing. The winter of materialism is going and the spring of bhakti is coming. When the winter goes and summer comes, you take off your sweaters. When the summer goes and winter comes, you put on your sweaters. Similarly, the season of materialism is going. People are really tired, frustrated and disappointed with this culture.

I am a person who looks to the future and forgets about the past. The 20th century has been one of technology. The 21st century will be one of bhakti and naam sankirtan. This will be necessary because we are going to face a great problem – how to save humankind. When we have to save humankind, we have to choose a path. In the same way, whenever there is increase in political injustice, atrocities or anarchy, there is a rise in bhakti and dharma in society. Sri Krishna declares in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:7):

*Yadaa yadaa hi dharmasya glaanir bhavati bhaarata;
Abhyutthaanam adharmasya tadaatmaanam srijaamyaham.*

Whenever there is decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, I manifest Myself.

The generation of the 21st century will belong to the bhakti yoga culture, because humankind has developed its feelings and emotions to quite an extent during the present era. People's feelings are no longer suppressed or blocked; they are out. They may be a little perverted but they are expressed. These expressed feelings now have to be redirected and streamlined.

What is the story of Bhakti and Maya?

Swami Niranjanananda: In my childhood I used to hear a story about two sisters, Bhakti and Maya. Bhakti was beautiful; she would wear pretty clothes and people were attracted to her. Maya was ugly, and her clothes were tattered and torn; she had no ornaments and nobody looked at her. Maya would always lament that Bhakti was prettier. She was jealous

because people would gravitate to Bhakti and not to her. “I don’t have good clothes or jewellery, whereas Bhakti has everything,” she complained. Therefore, she devised a plan.

One day, when Bhakti and Maya had gone to the river for the morning bath, Maya finished her bath quickly, came out, put on Bhakti’s clothes and disappeared as fast as possible. She was ugly, but she covered her face with all the fine clothes, so that it was not really visible. People now started chasing her, deluded by her dazzling appearance.

Meanwhile, although Bhakti was pretty, people would not go near her, as she was forced to don the torn and tattered clothes of her sister. People said, “She might be pretty, but she is a beggar and she cannot attract us.”

In this Kali Yuga, people chase maya and turn their backs on bhakti. In Satya Yuga, it was the opposite. People give importance to maya or bhakti according to their mentality. If they give importance to bhakti then we bow down to them, as bhakti is the refuge of a human being, and that which takes one to the Ultimate.

At a time when there is so much upheaval in the world, why are there so few mystics and saints?

Swami Satyananda: Mystics and saints are the salt of the earth. They are the connecting link. A mala has twenty-seven beads, but if there is no thread connecting them, the beads will be dispersed. Mystics and saints bind the universe in one single chain. Mystics do not work on the external arena; they work on the esoteric field, the inner field. They are not few in number. They have been keeping quiet, for in the last one hundred and fifty years, humankind has become materialistic. People want to enjoy the sensual, material life.

Saints and mystics have allowed them to undergo that experience because they know the outcome will be *vairagya*, distaste. If you overeat, you will develop distaste for food. If you eat with control, it is all right. If you enjoy sensual life in controlled doses, it is all right. But if you go into sensual

life headlong, up to the neck, distaste will develop. When this distaste grows, people will once again go in search of saints and mystics. The coming century is going to talk about it.

What is the need of bhakti and dharma?

Swami Niranjanananda: Dharma is not religion; it is that which is constructive, creative, positive and conducive to one's growth. Bhakti is the channelling of one's inner expressions and emotions towards an experience of inner harmony. Thus, on the one hand the aspirant is channelling human faculties with the aim of experiencing inner harmony, bhakti, and on the other hand, the aspirant is imbibing those qualities which can give an understanding of human relationships or dharma. These two should go hand in hand if life is to be lived fully and the goal of life attained.

Everyone seems to be thinking along one track only: take birth, become educated, get a job, rise high on the ladder of name, fame and status, have a family and educate the children so that they can continue the rat race, and die. This is the most prevalent social system in the world today. In this form of life, there is little scope for fully realizing or expressing either dharma or bhakti.

Yogis have always maintained that dharma is the highest expression and bhakti the highest attainment. As spiritual aspirants, no matter how involved you are in spirituality, whether superficially or deeply, you should try to be aware of the qualities that you can develop and express for the betterment of the family, friends, society and the world. That is dharma.

You should learn how to channel your mental expressions so that your mental energies are not dissipated and confusion does not occur. Once you learn to do this, you can then ultimately experience purity of heart. When you combine dharma and bhakti, you can experience a natural life, be one with nature and the divine, with the manifest and the transcendental.

Therefore, you should move towards an application and understanding of dharma and bhakti in your life through whatever method or process you can adopt. This is the natural urge in every individual, especially when people are feeling a need to express themselves in a different way. If you can combine dharma and bhakti, that is the best way to see a new dawn and find a positive direction in the 21st century.

Why is it imperative that humankind takes up the path of bhakti in the 21st century?

Swami Satyananda: Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, has once remarked, “In a civilization where the emotional side of man is left undeveloped and unchecked, many mistakes will be made at national and political levels, because, after all, the leaders of the country are no different from people like you and me. Where there is emotional stress, emotional breakdown and absolute lack of self-control, the whole race moves along the wrong path, war takes place and the civilization is completely destroyed, this has happened a number of times in history.”

To prevent national and racial disaster, the emotional side of man, of the race, of the nation, should be properly channelled. To channel the emotional personality of man, bhakti yoga is the best path as it consumes the unused, surplus emotion in man which otherwise becomes anarchical. Another way is service to the nation and to the poor. This is also a good way of sublimating the emotions. After all, when one serves others, one only helps oneself. Service of the poor is nothing but the adjustment of unused and anarchical complexes, and that is why in spiritual life it is said that one must serve the poor.

For achieving mental peace two things are necessary: one is acceptance of one's situation in life and the other is bhakti, love for God. Where there is bhakti there is peace of mind, no worries, likes, dislikes, love, hatred, anger or passion. Peace means acceptance.

How will bhakti unfold for the next generation?

Swami Satyananda: The next generation will ask about God. They will ask the questions which this generation, by and large, is not asking. This generation is only interested in kama and artha, not dharma and moksha. In the next generation, bhakti and dharma will become relevant. The yogas expounded in the 20th century were suited to the needs and evolution of humanity for that period. Therefore, the form of yoga was limited to self-discipline, self-introspection and self-improvement.

Yoga is taking another step forward. It is expanding beyond the personal, selfish and narrow confines of individual practice, teachings and ideals, to encompass a broad spectrum of devotion, dedication and integral participation in human emancipation. There will be no other way to evolve through yoga. All will eventually have to pull down their separate fences and signboards and begin to work together in one united, consecutive effort to uplift and free humanity from all forms of deprivation and degradation.

The misery of others is your misery. To free another of his misery is your freedom, your happiness and fulfilment. What to speak of freeing whole families, communities, states, nations and worlds. Freedom is infinite for those who walk in the light of this yoga, who take up the path of giving and sharing with one another, who dedicate and devote themselves, their time and their money to the upliftment of others.

God will be the subject of the 21st century. It is necessary to speak about God, and it does not matter whether it is done in a Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu way. Something transcendental has to come as a focus for the mind. God has to be brought forth systematically and scientifically, not as someone mysterious.

Discover your relationship with God, whether He is your father, your mother, your son, your dear friend or your soul. Work at it, and try to be in tune with God. If you love someone, you do not have to leave your job. If a boy and girl

fall in love, they do not stop eating or going to the office. It is a matter of awareness. They are both deeply immersed in each other's awareness. Whatever they do, they feel pleasant, unified and life becomes different for them.

Have there been other times in history when the bhakti culture pervaded society?

Swami Satyananda: The path of bhakti or devotion is not meant only for pleasing God. Bhakti is a culture and it forms the basis of our social system. This system has a basis. In history, the bhakti revolution started in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when the country was undergoing political anarchy. After Ashoka and the ascendancy of Adi Shankaracharya, there was a political vacuum which resulted in an increase in terror, tyranny and injustice. The social laws were breaking down, and under those circumstances many eminent stalwarts emerged on the social horizon and started the bhakti movement. That bhakti movement provided a common platform for the vedic religion and Islam, who were fighting with one another. That is what is going to happen again in the 21st century.

Why is bhakti yoga, the yoga of love and seva, the need of the coming age?

Swami Niranjanananda: The yoga darshan, theories and sadhanas have their own place or function. One must follow these paths but one should also have one more aim. Due to narrow-mindedness and selfishness, one always tries to fulfil one's own desires. Desires are never ending. There is one desire today, another tomorrow and another the day after. One cannot transcend these desires. Maybe it is one's destiny, karma or nature. Whatever it may be, desires are not being renounced, yet to transform or direct desires one can take a sankalpa. That sankalpa is to perform seva for humankind with one's full ability.

When the attitude of seva comes, the perspective changes. To try and cure a sick person is service, to try to

give peace to an unbalanced person is also service. The area of seva is broad. Seva is certainly an ideal and also a dharma, and it is even a practical difficulty. When seva is taken as a limitless field and there is preparation for service emotionally, theoretically, intellectually, socially, physically and mentally, then seva is successful in uplifting humanity.

In this age, the scriptures say that there are only two ways to attain God. One way is through karma and the other way is through bhakti. In this age, one cannot just do sadhana and manifest a new creation and a new heaven like Vishwamitra did. In this age, one cannot relate to divine beings just by doing japa and meditation. That is not the need of this age.

The need of this age is to have an attitude of seva towards others. When there is an attitude of seva then compassion, affection, love and devotion happen spontaneously. If it happens, then one day seva will become the new dharma. Going to temples and having darshan of divine beings is not real darshan. The actual darshan lies within humankind itself. People should develop the attitude that the woman who sweeps the roads and cleans the toilet is their Lakshmi, their Parvati and their Uma. The man, who works, begs and has no place to live, is their Narayana, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra. If people can awaken this attitude then life will definitely be fulfilled and if they cannot become a sun, at least they can become a candle flame.

How can international peace be promoted by the bhakti movement?

Swami Satyananda: Bhakti is the path, God is the destiny, we are the travellers. This is the only truth. You are born with only one destiny. You are an experiment and the outcome of that experiment is the experience of God. Many people in the past have had that experience, but many more will have it in the future. People are turning towards spirituality; they are adopting the path that leads to God.

One can worship God in any form one likes. If every single person were to light one candle for another person,

how many candles would be lit in the process? With this chain reaction every house would be lit with a candle.

One Family

The whole world is one family.
Feel for the suffering of others.
Open your heart to compassion.
Share what you have with others.
A few more smiles of silent sympathy,
A look of compassion,
A few more tender and gentle words,
A few more kind acts
Would go a long way to contributing to
The happiness of suffering humanity.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*



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8. The Age of Bhakti

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SAFEGUARD BHAKTI!

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BHAGAVAD GITA

1. Kirtan

(12:8) Fix your mind on Me alone; let your thoughts dwell on Me. You will hereafter live in Me alone. About this, there is no doubt. 22

2. Anushthana

(2:69) That which is night to all beings, then the self-controlled man is awake; when all beings are awake, that is night for the sage who sees. 58

3. Ishta Devata

(8:14) I am easily attainable by that ever-steadfast yogi who constantly and daily remembers Me (for a long time), not thinking of anything else with a single mind (one-pointed mind), O Partha. 74

5. God's Will

(18:66) Abandoning all duties, take refuge in Me (God) alone: I will liberate thee from all sins; grieve not. 123

6. A New Way of Life

(9:30) Even if the most sinful worships Me, with devotion to no one else, he too should indeed be regarded as righteous for he has rightly resolved. 157

(9:27) Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you practise as austerity, O Arjuna, do it as an offering unto Me. 196

7. Divine Grace

(10:10) To those who are ever steadfast, worshipping Me with love, I give the yoga of discrimination by which they come to me. 206

(9:28) Thus shalt thou be free from the bonds of actions yielding good and evil fruits; with the mind steadfast in the yoga of renunciation and liberated, thou shalt come unto Me. 207

(18:62) Seek refuge in Him alone, O Arjuna, with all your heart and faith. By His grace only can you gain supreme peace and the eternal abode. 208

(2:46) To the brahmana who has known the Self, all the Vedas are as useful as a reservoir of water when there is a flood everywhere. 209

(18:66) Abandoning all duties, take refuge in Me (God) alone: I will liberate you from all sins; grieve not. 210

(6:14) This divine illusion of Mine, caused by the qualities, is hard to pierce; they who come to Me cross over this illusion. 220

8. The Age of Bhakti

(4:7) Whenever there is decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, I manifest Myself. 251

KATHOPANISHAD

7. Divine Grace

(1:2:23) Not by study or discourses, not by argument, not by intelligence is the Self attained. He whom the Lord chooses attains Self-realization. He reveals Himself to such a chosen person. 215

NARADA BHAKTI SUTRAS

5. God's Will

(sutra 48) He who renounces the fruits of his actions and who renounces all actions goes beyond the pairs of opposites (such as pleasure and pain, good and bad, heat and cold). 141

6. A New Way of Life

(sutra 62) Until bhakti is developed one must not neglect to observe social customs and ceremonies. One should surely perform them but only the fruits of all social activities are to be surrendered to the Lord. 163

(sutra 14) Social customs and practices also may be followed in like manner, to the same extent only (as scriptural injunctions). But eating, drinking, dressing should be continued as long as one wears this body. 164

7. Divine Grace

(sutra 38) Success in devotion is attained mainly by the grace of great men, or through a slight measure of divine grace. 213

8. The Age of Bhakti

(sutras 4–6) On attaining supreme love one becomes perfect, immortal and fully satisfied. Attaining this divine love he does not desire anything else, neither does he grieve over any loss or death of dear ones, nor does he hate anything; he does not indulge in sensual pleasures, nor does he feel any urge for the acquisition of material things. Knowing this man becomes intoxicated, peaceful and completely immersed in enjoying the bliss of the atman. 241

RAMACHARITAMANAS

1. Kirtan

(Uttarakanda, after doha 128, chau 3, 1)
That man achieves fulfilment of his desires,
Who sings this story abandoning desires and deceit.
Those who listen to it and recommend it,
Cross this world-ocean as if it were the footprints of a cow.
O Girija, I have described the story of Rama,
Which is able to alienate the filth of Kali Yuga
And also erase the defects of the mind. 34

5. God's Will

(Balakanda, after doha 27, chau 6, and doha 28)
Rama is pleased only with devotion –
Otherwise who is more foolish and
Fickle-minded than me in the world?
Kind Rama will keep in mind
The love and interest of even the wicked servant,
He, by whose grace stones behaved like boats
And foolish monkeys and bears became advisors.
Seeing a servant like Tulsidas
And a master like Rama, the husband of Sita,
People laugh, but it is Lord Rama who has to bear this. 143

7. Divine Grace

(Uttarakanda, after doha 85, chau 1–4)
Now, listen to what I say,
Which is highly pure, true and simple,
As has been described in the Vedas.
I am telling you of my principles.

Listen and bear them in mind.
 And remember me, abandoning all else.
 This world has been created by my illusion,
 Along with all the beings, sentient and insentient.
 They are all of different categories.
 Among them are the twice born,
 And among the twice born
 Are those who know the Vedas.
 Among them also are those who live
 According to the Vedas and dharma.
 Even among those who are detached and wise,
 The specially wise are dearer to me.
 But my servants, who have no hope
 Except in me, are dearest to me.
 I tell you truly, again and again,
 That no one is dearer to me than my devotees. 228
 (Aranyakanda, after doha 32, chau 1)
 Rama is so soft-hearted
 And kind to the poor,
 That He shows mercy
 Even without being asked for it. 229
 (Aranyakanda after doha 32, chau 1)
 Say, what is the nature of the Lord
 That He has so much affection
 And love for His servants? 229

8. The Age of Bhakti

(Uttarakand, after doha 129, chau 3)
 In Kali Yuga there is no need of yoga,
 Yajna, japa, austerity, fasting or worship.
 The only dependable means is faith
 And remembrance of the name of Lord Rama. 231
 (Balakanda, after doha 20, chau 3–4)
 If one remembers the name, even without seeing the form,
 Love flashes in the heart spontaneously.
 The mystery of name and form is beyond words.
 It is delightful if understood, but words cannot express it.
 The name is a bridge between manifest and unmanifest.
 It is an efficient interpreter, revealing the truth of both.
 If you have a desire to enlighten the inner and outer apartments,

Tulsidas advises you to keep the jewelled lamp
Of the name of Rama on the tongue.
For that is the doorway between the inner and outer self. 234

SHVETASHVATARA UPANISHAD

8. The Age of Bhakti

(1:1) O knower of Brahma,
Who is Brahma, the cause of this world?
Where have we taken our birth?
Through whom are we living?
And in whom are we established?
Under whose control do we live our life
In happiness and in sorrow? 247

Glossary

Adharma – disharmony; not fulfilling one's natural role in life; unrighteousness

Advaita Vedanta – non-dualistic philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya based on the experience of Brahman as the Absolute Reality, the union of Brahman and atma, (the universe and the individual soul)

Agama – the philosophy and scriptures of tantra where Shiva teaches his consort Parvati; esoteric tradition of tantra suitable for the present age of Kali Yuga

Ahamkara – faculty of ego, awareness of the existence of 'I'; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument

Ahuti – offering, oblation

Akarta – non-doer

Akhanda – unbroken, whole; entire; complete

Anadi – beginningless

Anahata – 'unstruck' or 'unbeaten' sound heard by yogis

Ananda – pure bliss; natural state of consciousness

Antaranga – inner part; internal portion

Antarmukha vritti – state in which the mind is turned inwards

Antaryamin – inner ruler; the Supreme Being present in every object of creation and guiding all creatures

Anugraha – divine grace; kindness; assistance

Anushasana – complete instruction; advice; subtle management

Anushthana – a resolve to perform a sadhana, often mantra sadhana, with absolute discipline for a requisite period of time; a fixed course of sadhana

Apara vidya – intellectual knowledge

Aranyakanda – third section (kanda) of *Ramacharitamanas*

Arati – worship involving waving of lights with reverence before a deity

Artha – prosperity; material need; accomplishment; attainment in all spheres of life

Ashirvada – blessing, benediction

Ashram – place of spiritual practice and growth through internal and external labour

Asuric – negative, destructive

Ashwamedha yajna – horse sacrifice; a yajna performed by a powerful king

Atma, atman – the self beyond mind and body; principle of life, highest reality, Supreme Consciousness, spirit, soul

Atmabhava – feeling of unity with all; seeing the atman (soul) equally in all beings

Atmashuddhi – purification of the self; purity of the self

Avarana – ignorance; veiling or covering which hides or excludes part of the reality; a function of maya

Avatara – descent or incarnation of God to the mortal plane

Avinashi – indestructible

Bahiranga – external part

Balakanda – first section (kanda) of *Ramacharitamanas*

Bhagavad Gita – literally, ‘divine song’; Sri Krishna’s discourse to his disciple Arjuna delivered on the battlefield of Kurukshetra at the commencement of the great Mahabharata war; one of the source books of Hindu philosophy, containing the essence of the Upanishads and yoga

Bhagavan – God

Bhajan – devotional song

Bhakta – devotee

Bhakti – intense inner devotion in which the intellect, emotions and self are channelled towards a relationship with the divine

Bhakti yoga – branch of yoga in which emotional energy is channelled towards a divine relationship; a systematic path with nine stages which expand, strengthen and purify the emotions

Bhasma – sacred ashes

Bhava, bhavana – feeling; condition; attitude; inclination or disposition of mind

Bhava samadhi – samadhi attained through intense emotion

Bhoga – sensual enjoyment; external experience

Bhogi – a person with gross mentality and materialistic tendencies; sensualist; an individual involved in karma for personal satisfaction and not for inner purification

Bija – seed; seed state; source, origin

Brahma anubhava – the absolute experience, direct realization of the Self

Brahma vidya – science of the Self; knowledge of Brahman, the Supreme Existence

Brahmacharya – being absorbed in higher consciousness; sublimation of sexual energy for spiritual development; celibacy; conduct suitable for proceeding to the highest state of existence

Brahmamuhurta – the two hours around sunrise (in India between 4 am and 6 am) best suited to yoga sadhana

Brahmi vritti – mental modification that leads to identification with the witnessing consciousness or Brahman; spiritual aspect of the vrittis, the self-aware, individual consciousness

Brahmin – the priestly caste; one whose consciousness is immersed in Brahman

Darshan – a glimpse; vision; direct perception; philosophy

Deva – being of light; divine being

Devata – form of divine dignity or power; divine being representing the higher states of evolution

Devi – female deity, goddess

Divya drishti – inner vision, divine vision

Durgasaptashati – part of the *Markandeya Purana*; it tells the story of Durga's creation, of her glories and victories over the demonic forces

Dwapara Yuga – the third aeon of the world

Dwesha – repulsion, aversion; hatred, enmity, dislike; one of the five causes of affliction (kleshas) described in Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as aversion to the unpleasant

Ekadashi – 11th day of the lunar fortnight, a time when mantra chanting and dietary restraint are held to be beneficial

Gayatri mantra – a most sacred twenty-four syllable mantra which enables learning

Grihastha ashrama – the second stage of life according to the ancient vedic ashrama tradition, ie household or married life from 25 to 50 years of age

Gunas – quality; the three gunas, qualities or aspects of prakriti (nature) are sattwa, rajas and tamas

Havan – offering an oblation into a fire

Hiranyagarbha – cosmic mind or subtle body; Brahman; golden seed of the unity of life; it is said that Brahman alone is creating himself from his own substance

Ikshvaku – first of the solar kings

Indriyas – sense organ; power of the senses

Ishta deva, ishta devata – one's personal chosen deity and form of worship

Ishwara pranidhana – cultivation of faith in the supreme or indestructible reality; surrender to God; complete dedication of one's actions and will to the Lord

Japa – a meditation practice involving repetition of a mantra

Jiva – principle of life; individual or personal soul; living being

Jivanmukta – liberated in life; an enlightened person, a person purified by true knowledge of the Supreme Reality and freed from future births while still embodied

Jivatma – individual or personal soul

Jnana – knowledge, cognition, wisdom; higher knowledge derived from meditation or from inner experience

Jnani – one who expresses wisdom in daily life

Jyotirlingam – see Shivalingam

Kaivalya – final liberation; highest state of samadhi; that state of consciousness which is beyond duality

Kali Yuga – the present age or yuga; during this cycle man is collectively at the height of technology, decadence, dishonesty and corruption of spiritual awareness

Kalpa vriksha – wish-fulfilling tree; a psychic centre closely linked with anahata chakra

Kama, kamana – emotional, sensual fulfillment; love; lust; one of the four purusharthas; see Purushartha

Karma – action and result; law of cause and effect

Kartavya – duty; that which ought to be done

Katha – a tale, story

Kathopanishad – one of the principal Upanishads

Kirtan, kirtanam – singing of God's name; practice in which a group of people sing a collection of mantras

Kripa – blessing, grace, mercy

Kshatriya – the warrior caste; one who protects others from injury

Likhit japa – the practice of writing a mantra

Lila – literally, 'play'; activity of prakriti and its three gunas

Linga – see Shivalingam

Mahabharata – epic of ancient India said to be composed by Sage Vedavyasa, involving the history and consequences of the great battle between the Kaurava and Pandava princes. It consists of eighteen sections and the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of it

Mahamantra – the 'great mantra'; generally used for the mantra Hare Krishna Hare Rama

Mahamrityunjaya mantra – the 'great victory over death' mantra, used to avoid calamities, for overcoming the fear of death

Mahatma – literally, 'great soul'; used with reference to a person who has destroyed the ego and realized the self as one with all

Manana – reflection, the second of the three steps on the path of knowledge in vedantic sadhana

Mandala – visual image, form or symbol which one may visualize or concentrate on, externally or internally, may

be two or three-dimensional; circular symbolic pictorial depiction of cosmic power and/or the human psyche

Mandir – temple

Mantra – words of power; sound vibrations which liberate the mind when repeated

Moksha – liberation from the cycles of birth and death and the illusion of maya

Mukti – release, liberation, final absolution of the consciousness from the chain of birth and death and from the illusion of maya

Murti – body; form shape figure, statue; symbol; idol

Nada – sound; subtle sound or vibration created by the union of the Shiva and Shakti tattwas; the first manifestation of the unmanifest Absolute

Narada Bhakti Sutras – one of the main bhakti yoga texts, authored by Sage Narada

Navaratri – a period of nine days; celebration of the Cosmic Shakti

Nirakara – without form, formless; unmanifest

Nirvana – cessation of suffering, final liberation or emancipation in Buddhist thought; higher state of existence or awareness

Nishkama – without desire, expectation or personal interest

Para bhakti – supreme devotion, bhakti. It is said to accompany or follow the highest knowledge and be a state of consciousness which is self-contained

Paramatma – cosmic Soul or Consciousness; Supreme Self; the atma of the entire universe; God

Parivrajaka – wandering mendicant; ascetic

Pooja – worship

Poornahuti – total offering; final ceremonial offering in a sacrifice

Prasad – favour, grace; blessed gift or object, something full of grace

Pravritti marga – the path of extroversion, engaging in modification of consciousness (vrittis)

Prem – love, affection; tenderness; regard

Puranas – eighteen ancient texts containing the earliest mythology of the tantric and vedic traditions

Purascharana – observance consisting of the repetition of a mantra

Purushartha – human attainment; self-effort; the four basic needs or desires to be fulfilled in life, viz artha (wealth), kama (desire), dharma (duty), moksha (liberation)

Ramacharitamanas – a version of the *Ramayana* written by Tulsidas. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Ramayana – one of the most famous ancient Indian epics, relating the life of Sri Rama, the most widely known version was composed by Valmiki, containing about 24,000 verses in sections

Rig Veda – the oldest of the four Vedas, the most ancient sacred books of the eternal dharma. It contains hymns to the deities or guardians of the law, such as Agni, Varuna, Indra and Mitra and presents nature as a living force working in the interests of humanity

Rishi – seer; realized sage; one who contemplates or meditates on the Self

Sadhana – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly

Sakara – with form; manifest

Samsara – illusory world; the course or circuit of worldly life; unending cycle of birth and death

Samskara – mental impression stored in the subtle body as an archetype; the impressions which condition one's nature, causing one to react or respond in a certain way

Sandhya – three times of day when there is a confluence of energies: sunrise, noon and sunset; transition; union; division; time of sadhana

Sanga – association, company

Sankalpa – positive resolve; purpose, aim, intention; willpower

Sankirtan – see Kirtan

Sannyasa – dedication; complete renunciation of the world, its possessions and attachments; abandonment of the phenomenal world

Sannyasi, sannyasin – one who has taken sannyasa initiation, surrendering everything to the guru and the spiritual journey

Santosha, samtushta – complete contentment, complete absence of any desire

Satsang, satsanga – gathering in which the ideals and principles of truth are discussed; spiritual association; association with the wise and the good

Seva – literally, ‘being That’; service; selfless service; to become one with the divine transcendental nature, and to express that nature in thought, word and deed

Shaivite, Shaivas – relating to the God Shiva; one who worships Shiva as the supreme reality

Shakti – primal energy; manifest consciousness; power, ability, capacity, strength, energy; counterpart of Shiva; the moving power of nature and consciousness; in Hindu mythology Shakti is often symbolized as a divine woman

Shastra – an authoritative treatise on any subject, particularly science and religion; sacred book

Shivalinga, shivalingam – black oval-shaped stone; symbol of Shiva; symbol of consciousness

Shraddha – trust, faith, belief; religious faith; composure of mind

Shravan, shravanam – to listen, to hear the scriptures; the second of the three steps on the path of knowledge in vedantic sadhana

Siddha – an adept or perfected person; one who has developed his/her psychic and pranic capacity to the point of mastery

Siddhi – perfection; enhanced pranic and psychic capacity; paranormal or supernormal accomplishment; control of mind and prana; eight supernatural powers obtained by yogis as a result of long practice

Srimad Bhagavata, Bhagavatam – one of the eighteen major Puranas dealing with the avatars of Vishnu, it speaks in great detail about the life of Sri Krishna; see Puranas

Sutra – thread; condensed statements strung together to give an outline of a philosophy

- Swadhyaya** – self-study; continuous conscious awareness of what one is doing; study of scriptures; one of the niyamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga
- Swaroop** – one's own form or shape; natural state or condition; essential nature; true constitution
- Tantra** – most ancient universal science and culture which deals with the transition of human nature from the present level of evolution and understanding to a transcendental level of knowledge, experience and awareness; a particular path of sadhana including mantra, yantra and other esoteric practices
- Tapasya** – practice of austerity
- Tyaga** – renunciation or gradual dissociation of the mind from worldly objects and desire
- Upanishads** – the philosophical portion of the Vedas, traditionally 108 in number, containing intimate dialogues and discussions between guru and disciple on the nature of the Absolute and the path leading towards it; literally, 'to sit near and listen' (to the spiritual teacher)
- Upasana** – personalized form of worship
- Uttarakanda** – seventh section (kanda) of *Ramacharitamanas*
- Vaishnava** – the sect that reveres incarnations of Vishnu as the Supreme Reality.
- Vandana, vandanam** – adoration, salutation; one of the means to attain the state of bhakti
- Vasana** – subtle impressions which are the seeds of desires
- Vedanta** – one of the six principle systems of Indian philosophy; literally, 'the last part of the Vedas'; the school of thought based primarily on the Upanishads; the doctrine of non-dualism (Advaita)
- Vedantin** – practitioner of Vedanta, a philosophy stating one non-dual eternal principle underlying and causing all creation
- Vedas** – ancient texts revealed to the sages and saints of India, explaining and regulating every aspect of life from the Supreme Reality to worldly affairs; four in number: *Rig*,

Yajur, Sama, Atharva, which are further divided into the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads; the oldest books in the library of mankind, parts of them revealed to sages and seers before 5,000 BCE

Vikshepa – dissipation; the tossing of the mind which obstructs concentration

Viveka – discrimination; right knowledge or understanding

Vrata – vow

Vritti – a modification arising in the mind related to a thought pattern; a particular mental state or condition

Yajna – sacrifice; yajna has three components: ritual or worship, satsang and unconditional giving

Yuga – aeon; an age of the world

Glossary of Names and Places

Agni – fire; the god of fire

Arjuna – name of the third Pandava brother; son of Indra and Kunti; in the *Bhagavad Gita* he received divine revelation from Sri Krishna

Aurobindo, Sri – (1872–1950) famous yogi from Pondicherry, concerned with the transformative power of yoga on all levels of the human being

Ayodhya – birthplace of Sri Rama

Bhishma – the son of Santanu and Ganga; he was known for his wisdom, firmness of resolve and unflinching devotion to God

Brahma, Brahman – etymologically, ‘ever expanding, limitless consciousness’; name of Supreme Consciousness or cosmic intelligence according to Vedanta philosophy; God as creator; monistic concept of Absolute Reality

Buddha – (566–483 BCE) ‘The enlightened one’; commonly referred to the founder of Buddhism

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Gouranga – (1485–1534) reformer of the Vaishnava faith; one of the contributors of the bhakti movement in India during the Mughal era

Dasharatha – king of Ayodhya; father of Sri Rama

Dattatreya – an ancient sage who learned from twenty-four gurus; considered to be an incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; author of *Yoga Shastra of Dattatreya*

Draupadi – wife of the five Pandava brothers, in the *Mahabharata* epic; great devotee of Sri Krishna

Dhritarashtra – blind king; father of the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*

Durga – Goddess who removes difficulties, wife of Shiva

Durvasa, Rishi – sage whose anger has become proverbial

Dwarika – the capital of Sri Krishna's kingdom at the western point of Gujarat

Gandhi, Mahatma – (1869–1948) Indian national leader who established his country's freedom through a non-violent revolution

Ganesha – the elephant-headed Hindu deity who is the remover of obstacles

Ganga – river Ganges, the most sacred river in India

Girija – another name of the Goddess Parvati

Gopis – companions of the young Krishna in Vrindavan

Govinda – another name of Sri Krishna

Guru Nanak – (1469–1538) founder of Sikhism

Hanuman – name of a powerful monkey chief possessing extraordinary strength and powers which he manifested on several critical occasions on behalf of Sri Rama, the Lord of his heart

Hari – name of Vishnu, the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the preservation of the universe; Supreme Consciousness

Indra – king of the vedic gods, the ruler of heaven; lord of the senses; the mind or the soul; the rain god

Jnanadeva, Jnaneshwar – (1275–1296) Indian saint; author of the classical texts *Jnaneshwari* and *Bharati Deepika*

Kabir, Kabirdas – (1440–1518) poet and mystic, his teachings blend Hinduism, Sufism and bhakti

Kailash – sacred mountain in the Himalayas; residence of Shiva and Parvati

Kakabhushundi – he was cursed by his guru, Sage Lomasha, to incarnate as a crow; devotee of Sri Rama and narrator of Sri Rama's story

Kali – primal manifestation of Shakti; destroyer of time, space, object and ignorance

Krishna, Sri – the ‘black’ or ‘dark one’; eighth incarnation of Vishnu; avatara who descended in the Dwapara Yuga. Sri Krishna is perhaps the most celebrated hero in Hindu mythology and seems to be an historical figure. To uphold dharma he orchestrated the Mahabharata war. His teachings to his friend and disciple Arjuna during that war are immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita*

Manasarovar – sacred lake in the Himalayas; near Mount Kailash

Mahadeva – another name of Shiva

Mirabai – (1547–1614) princess; Indian poet saint; devotee of Sri Krishna

Mrityunjaya – another name of Shiva

Namdev – (1270–1350) Indian saint of Maharashtra; devotee of Lord Vitthala, a form of Sri Krishna

Narada, Sage – author of *Narada Bhakti Sutras*; devotee of Vishnu

Narayana – another name of Vishnu

Nataraja – name of Shiva during his cosmic dance, literally, ‘Lord of Dance’

Patanjali, Sage – author of the *Yoga Sutras*; rishi who codified the system of raja yoga

Prahlada – son of demon Hiranyakashipu; great devotee of Vishnu. His faith helped him withstand many trials; Vishnu saved him in the form of Narasimha, half man and half lion.

Rabindranath Tagore – (1861–1914) Indian poet and philosopher; founder of Shanti Niketan, West Bengal, which offers a model of high quality education

Radha – beloved gopi of Sri Krishna

Raidas, Ravidas – (15th/16th century) poet-saint; born in Varanasi to a cobbler family; disciple of Kabirdas

Rama, Sri – the seventh avatara of Vishnu and embodiment of dharma, hero of the epic *Ramayana*; a heroic and virtuous king

Ramakrishna, Paramahansa – (1836–1886) Indian saint and mystic who perfected sadhanas from all religions; guru of Swami Vivekananda

Rati – Goddess of love

Ratnakara – another name of Sage Valmiki

Ravana – the ten-headed demon king who kidnapped Sita, Sri Rama's wife, and was slain by Sri Rama; his ten heads symbolize attachment to the phenomenal reality

Shankaracharya, Adi – (782–820) name of a celebrated teacher of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, he was an enlightened sage who is said to have established the Dashnami order of sannyasa and authored a large number of scriptural works

Shiva – state of pure consciousness, individual and cosmic, original source of yoga Lord of yogis; auspicious, benevolent one; name of the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the work of destruction; destroyer of the ego and duality

Shyam – another name of Sri Krishna

Sita – daughter of King Janaka and the wife of Sri Rama, as recorded in the epic *Ramayana*

Surdas – (1478–1581) celebrated blind saint and poet of India; his devotional songs to Sri Krishna are known throughout India

Tukaram – (17th century) Indian poet saint of Maharashtra

Tulsidas – (1532–1623) author of one of the versions of the famous epic *Ramayana* called the *Ramacharitamanas*, which describes the life of Sri Rama. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Vaikuntha – heaven; abode of Vishnu

Valmiki, Sage – name of a celebrated sage who meditated for so long that he became interred in a termite mound. He was author of the first *Ramayana*

Vasishtha, Sage – a celebrated rishi and seer of the Vedas; guru of Sri Rama; author of many vedic hymns. His teachings are recorded in *Yoga Vasishtha*, one of the greatest expositions of jnana yoga

Vasudeva – father of Sri Krishna
Vedavyasa, Vyasa – compiler of the four Vedas in their present form
Vibhishana – youngest brother of demon Ravana; devotee of Sri Rama
Vishnu – vedic deity; the second deity of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), entrusted with the preservation of the universe, a duty which obliges him to appear in several incarnations; Supreme Consciousness
Vishwanath – another name of Vishnu
Vithoba – name of Sri Krishna at Pandharpur
Vitthal – name of Sri Krishna at Pandharpur
Vivekananda, Swami – (1863–1903); disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa; he brought his guru's teachings to the West
Vrindavan – name of a forest near Gokula where Sri Krishna used to play as a child
Yama – name of the Lord of Death
Yamuna – a sacred river near Vrindavan
Yashoda – foster mother of Sri Krishna; wife of Nanda

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Notes



Conversations on the Science of Yoga is an encyclopaedic series presenting the vast, timeless culture of yoga topic by topic through the voice of three generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati, Swami Satyananda Saraswati and Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati. The teachings are given in question and answer format with the inclusion of verses from the scriptures, connecting the modern experience with the classical tradition.

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